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LADY LAURA

VOL. II.

LADY LAURA

BY

MARY ELIZABETH CHRISTIE

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.



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CHAPTER I.

‘There’s something tells me (but it is not love) I would not lose you.’

AFTER all, the ride to Brynllwyd might have been deferred to a day when Cassandra considered herself free ; for Herne’s visit lengthened itself out far beyond its intended term, and he stayed at Ardgwen till the red and gold had faded from the landscape and November gloom lay heavy in the valley. And every day he grew more intimate with the family and more doubtful of the wisdom of upsetting a social system among the results of which such pleasant households as this

were to be numbered. And he was liked as much as he liked. Lord St. Asaph found him a congenial companion, and Lady St. Asaph was grateful to him for lightening her husband's depression. Lady Sarah struck up quite a warm friendship with him, and before she went away, she had given him pressing invitations to come and stay at Llanoun and see her schools and other useful institutions. Even Lord Rhoss forgot to find him a bore.

And Laura?

That bright gleam of cordial friendship, which had broken so pleasantly across the reserve she had assumed in her first intercourse with Herne, had vanished suddenly as it had come; and now again she was silent and unapproachable. If he tried to engage her in conversation, she remembered some duty that called her away; or if constrained to remain in the room, she

answered in chilling monosyllables and turned eagerly to talk with some other person. And yet, with a strange perverseness, when he was talking to others her eyes would stray in his direction, and no word that fell from him escaped her ear. She watched him come and go, and was conscious of an unwonted vibration through all her frame when he addressed her. She seemed to know beforehand what he was going to say, to catch meanings in his words which others missed; and more than once she was startled to find her eyes meeting his across the room in a flash of sympathy at some thought that one had uttered even while it crossed the mind of the other. What had happened to her? She trembled at the answer, for was not he Cassandra's lover?—was not she, in a manner, Cassandra's *confidante*? There was no excuse for her; she had

known how things were from the beginning.

And yet when, where, how had she been to blame? She could no more have said at what moment she had first felt a tremor in his presence than she could have told when the first red glow had come upon the woods. She could only long for his departure, and feel, even while she longed for it, a great dread of the emptiness that he would leave behind. She had a foretaste of what this would be every time he missed coming into luncheon, or their party was so divided in walks or rides that he went one way and she another. And yet she was always straining her ingenuity to bring about such arrangements; for she was resolved to be loyal to her cousin, cost what it might.

Sometimes she thought of seeking safety in confession to her mother or

her sister, for she knew that she had but to breathe a hint of her distress in order to be delivered from Herne's presence in the house. But many motives held her silent. Shame made her shrink from telling how her heart had strayed into love for the man who was to be her cousin's husband. It was better not to speak, she said to herself, for when once he was married to Cassandra all would be safe—all *must* be safe: they would then be on a well-defined footing, a certain degree of intimacy would be allowable, and self-respect would check all warmer feelings. It would be better then not to have spoken—fairer to herself, to Herne, to Cassandra. And then there were hopes whispering low in her heart that things might take a turn she had not looked for. It might be that she was mistaken about Cassandra, and in that case her self-reproach was uncalled-for. It might be,

. . . might be . . . might be that it was for her sake he was staying so long among them. It might be that one day he would tell her so. And then all her self-tormenting would pass like a bad dream.

The low whisperings prevailed, and she kept her secret from all about her. Not however without a sense of guilt that added much to her wretchedness ; for once, quite early in Herne's visit, she had had a little warning from Lady Sarah, which, as it came prematurely, she had been able to dismiss with honest assurances that she was in no danger. Rhoads, coming into the library one morning, had surprised her sitting on the floor in front of a bookcase in which old newspapers and periodicals were stowed away. A litter of papers was about her, and she was so absorbed in some pamphlet or magazine that she held in her hand

as not to notice his entrance. Laura was not in the habit of reading old newspapers and periodicals, and her brother's curiosity was a little excited : he looked over her shoulder and discovered that it was an article of Herne's in a back number of the *Reformer* that she was devouring with so much interest. He drew his inferences and communicated them to Lady Sarah, who, acting on the hint, gently cautioned Laura against letting her affections be entangled in a way that was not likely to be approved of by her father, and could therefore not lead to her own happiness. To which Laura had replied by assuring her sister that she was in no danger of feeling more than friendship for Herne, that she had only looked out the article because she wanted to understand something she had heard her father say about it, and that there were a thousand reasons why Sarah must not get

notions of this kind into her head. And she ended by telling all the little romance she had spun about Herne and Cassandra, with the result that Lady Sarah was quite satisfied that the alarm was needless. She told her brother so, and he shrugged his shoulders and remarked that, whatever happened, he considered that he had done his duty.

And now that there was real danger, Sarah was gone and no one seemed to suspect anything. The reserve that wrapped her round at all times served as a cloak for her secret, and no one discovered that a change had come over her. And yet the change was very great. In one short month she had learned to look differently on all without her and to doubt of much within. New worlds of thought had opened to her, new subjects claimed her interest. Politics, art, science, philosophy—all the dry

and learned topics of grown-up life, to which she had hitherto turned a deaf ear, seemed to have revealed themselves in forms of living interest. Knowledge had become incarnate and had spoken to her in a human voice. She felt ashamed now of the ignorance she had confessed so unconcernedly in her first talks with Herne; she hated herself for the indifference she had hitherto felt towards the wider interests of humanity. She longed to be more worthy according to his standard of worthiness, and blushed to find herself continually wondering what impression she was making on the man who was her cousin's lover.

But the visit could not last for ever. Pleasurable or painful, it had to end, and one Sunday morning Laura woke up to the consciousness that to-morrow she would be delivered from the presence that embarrassed her. She tried to per-

suade herself that she was glad, but there was no gladness in the eyes that looked at her from the glass while she was dressing; and those were hardly tears of joy that stole through her fingers a few hours later as she buried her face in her hands during the Litany and her heart stammered a prayer that she might be delivered from her distress—a prayer that brought no help, but rather increased her trouble and her shame. For here, in church, where he never came, sense of another guilt than treachery to Cassandra weighed upon her. This newcomer, who had taken all her sympathies by violence, seemed to stand between her and God; and every thought that went towards him seemed so much taken from her faith. She wanted to pray to be delivered from him; but while his image was present to her, prayer seemed vain, for he did not believe it could prevail.

She wiped away her tears and stared up at the window so that the sunlight might scorch her eyes dry. But they filled again immediately and she was fain to bury them once more. Then she saw Cassandra looking at her as if she were reading her secret; and with a strong effort she recovered self-command and looked steadily at her prayer-book during the remainder of the service.

The castle had been poorly represented at church that morning. Lord St. Asaph never went to church—nor Rhoss, whose Continental habit of breakfasting at eleven would have been interfered with by such an exercise. Herne's avowed principles of unbelief excused him of course, and Egmont was lazy on Sunday mornings and inclined to consider his weak ankle. So Lady St. Asaph and Laura had had the pew to themselves.

As they came out, they joined the rectory party and walked a little way with them. Then Cassandra and Anna turned back at Lady St. Asaph's invitation, and came up to the castle for luncheon.

As they came through the village Laura saw Rhoos and Herne coming to meet them, and in a moment she felt the painful tightness of her heart relax.

How well she knew that figure, the flexible height, the curve of the shoulders, the turn of the neck, and—over all—the brightness, the charm that no other figure had for her!

‘Is that Rhoos coming along?’ asked Lady St. Asaph.

‘Yes, I think so, Rhoos and Maurice Herne.’ It was Anna who spoke, and she added, ‘I wonder they are not ashamed to show themselves in the face of the whole congregation.’

‘Is it Mr. Herne?’ said Lady St.

Asaph, doubtfully. 'I thought it looked like Egmont.'

Herne and Egmont were about the same height, and Laura herself, as the reader may remember, had once mistaken Herne for her brother. She wondered now that she could ever have made such a mistake.

'I think it is Maurice,' repeated Anna; 'but I really don't feel sure.'

'It is certainly Maurice,' Cassandra said. 'I could never mistake his walk. There is a peculiar uncertain swing about it, as though he were trying to go in two directions at once.'

Laura looked up at Cassandra with wonder in her eyes. She had been feeling that not to give an opinion on this question of identity was to make herself singular, and yet she could not, if her life had depended on it, have said a word. And here was Cassandra giving her

opinion with perfect ease and going out of her way to suggest disparagement of Herne! A wild hope rushed to her heart, driving away the inclination to tears and the choking sensation at her throat. She gave herself up to it thankfully—joy was safer to-day than sadness, easier to conceal and less likely to be wondered at if it betrayed itself. She would drink the pleasant hope to the dregs, putting away the thought of the void misery that must come afterwards and be borne as it could. She smiled up at Herne when he spoke to her, making no attempt at reserve. She knew that if she answered coldly he would turn from her to Cassandra, and that then perhaps her tears would come again. She let him walk by her and talk. She would be happy for an hour, though all the future should be blank. Only she must avoid Cassandra's eyes and trample

down the thought of what Cassandra might be feeling.

Again at luncheon he was by her side, and again she gave herself to enjoyment ; she talked gaily, laughed, looked brilliant and lovely. But after luncheon she stole away to her room and knelt down by her bed and cried a long time. The others went for a walk ; but she said she was tired and would rather stay at home. And by the evening she was in the calm impassive state that follows upon a nervous paroxysm.

So the day came to an end. And next morning, before she was up, she heard wheels grinding along the carriage-road, and she knew that the dog-cart had come to take him to the early train at Cresford.

She crept to the window and drew back the blind and looked out into the autumn morning. The sunshine was almost as beautiful as on that morning when

they had rambled together, but the trees were very bare and to Laura the scene looked desolate. There was the dog-cart waiting, the horse tossing its head impatiently and rattling the ring of the bearing rein. She noticed that the rug she generally used in the pony-carriage had been flung over the seat, and she felt a pleasure in the fact. A servant brought out a portmanteau and put it under the seat. Then Egmont came and said something to the groom. And then—but then her eyes grew dim and she let the blind down and started back, for Herne was coming out and she dared not risk being seen. She left the window and went to the dressing-table where half-a-dozen withered cyclamens were standing in a glass. She took the flowers in her hand and placed them in a little note-book that she habitually carried about her. Then she pushed the book under her

pillow and crept into bed again. And in another moment she heard the wheels turn, and she knew that he was gone.

Very empty the house seemed all that day, very weary all the uses of her life for many days to come. But yet over and over again she said to herself that it was a relief that he was gone.

By degrees her life subsided again into its accustomed channels, the new suggestions of doubt and difficulty, which had begun to obscure the old lights, vanished from her view and left her sky clear and untroubled as of old ; and before a month was past the only outward change to be observed in her was an increased activity among the people of the village—the only inward change that seemed abiding to herself was her newly-awakened interest in the larger life of the world. She read newspapers and was attentive when questions of social im-

portance were discussed, and she made Cassandra explain to her much in art and science which had formerly been indifferent to her.

She believed that all danger was past and that her new interests held her by their intrinsic importance. But the withered cyclamens were not removed from their place, and the habit continued of putting the little pocket-book under her pillow at night.



CHAPTER II.

‘Do you not know I am a woman ?
When I think, I must speak.’

IT was a shock to Laura to find herself painfully confused when one day, about a fortnight before Christmas, Egmont, in speaking of some guest who was shortly expected at the castle, remarked that he should like him to meet Herne. She had not understood that Herne was coming again, and she was amazed to find that a certain self-consciousness prevented her from simply saying so, as would have been the natural course. She felt herself blushing at mention of his name ; and,

unwilling to meet her brother's look, she received the communication in silence.

Egmont misunderstood her silence and imputed it to dislike of Herne.

‘I can’t think why you have taken such a dislike to Herne,’ he said in a tone of annoyance. ‘He is really a very good fellow, full of kindheartedness and generosity. And though he has got very Radical opinions, I declare I think there is a great deal of reason in much that he says. He is not a bit of a prig; indeed he can’t be, or my father would never have taken such a fancy to him. It is very illiberal of you to dislike him, just because he is not a Conservative. You know the fact is, Laura,’

Here Egmont stopped and got rather red. He was beginning to feel it incumbent on him to have opinions and to express them; but at the same time he was conscious of the difficulty of

appearing in a new character in the family circle. Away from home, he talked politics with dignity if not with originality ; but at home his intellectual majority was not recognised, and he confined himself generally to more boyish subjects. His friendship with Herne had however given him courage of late ; besides, he had been reading political economy and constitutional history, and, what with books and the conversation of his friend, he was in as fair a way as most of us to become a political light.

He waited a moment to collect his ideas, and then began again. ‘ You see, Laura, I think we are a little too much inclined to stand still here. My father’s ill-health has put him out of the struggle ; he really knows nothing of the state of thought and feeling at the present day ; things have made

enormous strides since he was a young man; and of course, if things change, opinions must change too. And then, you know, though my mother is admirable in a practical way, she does not take a large view. They say women never do. I mean, you know, that though it's very nice to have the parish under one's own influence and to be a sort of royal family in the place, this sort of feudal state of things can't go on always, and that every man ought to look all these working-class questions boldly in the face so as to be ready to take his part when the time for action comes. And my father himself was a Liberal when he was a young man, though I don't know that that matters. . . . But what was I saying? Oh, I remember, I was speaking of Herne. He really is a very good fellow and thoroughly earnest in his opinions.'

‘I do not doubt his being in earnest, but I think he is rather unpractical,’ said Laura, getting more and more embarrassed, and feeling driven to say something, since Egmont was determined to argue about Herne’s merits. She had no particular meaning in saying that he was unpractical, and was annoyed to find the word taken up by her brother.

‘Unpractical? That’s what women always say when they don’t know what fault to find with a man.’

‘Do they?’ said Laura, with a peculiar smile that she seldom showed to any one but Egmont—a smile that betrayed the presence of some critical keenness under the diffidence and silence of her usual bearing. ‘Do they always say men are unpractical? I should say that showed there must be some truth in the charge.’

‘Not in the least; a thing does not

become true by repetition,' said Egmont sublimely. 'But what do you mean by being unpractical?'

'Talking about things that can't be done instead of doing what can.'

'Oh, if *that* is your idea of Herne,' said Egmont, rousing himself with sudden and somewhat scornful energy, 'I can only tell you that you are tremendously mistaken. He is always doing all sorts of good things—Quixotic sort of things, such as you don't often hear of a man's doing. He'll take any amount of trouble for a friend. The fact is, he is in a very unfair position here, and it's an infernal shame from beginning to end.'

'What do you mean?' said Laura, wishing heartily that she could tell her brother the true state of her feelings towards his friend instead of having to argue against him and herself at once.

'Oh, I mean with regard to the rectory

people. *You* must know as well as I do that they have got a grudge against him.'

'I know they don't like his opinions and that they think he had a bad influence upon Gerard.'

'Exactly, that's the very thing, and what I say is so infernally unfair. Gerard got into all sorts of scrapes at Oxford, and Herne helped him out of them and made the best of things at home. And then at last but it is not the sort of thing I can tell you about. Uncle Harvey would have been furious if he had ever heard the whole story. When Gerard had to leave Oxford in disgrace, and all idea of his taking orders had to be given up, they chose to say that it was Herne's fault: whereas everybody who had an ounce of sense knew perfectly well that Herne was the best friend Gerard ever had, and that Gerard was about as fit to go into the Church as

I am. I declare I wonder Herne condescends to speak to any of them again. Only I suppose he likes Cassandra, and that sort of thing will make a man overlook a good deal.'

'I wonder, too, that he comes among them. By doing so he seems to me to be thrusting himself upon relations who do not think well of him and who have shown that they wish to drop him. And—I cannot quite express what I mean—but I have a feeling that a man ought not to let himself be thought worse of than he deserves, and that if circumstances bring such a state of things about, he should avoid the society of those who misjudge him, and live in a world where he can be known as he is. I think that must be the meaning of not putting one's light under a bushel.'

'Pshaw!' said Egmont, 'I wish I had not told you about Herne. You have

only turned it all to his disadvantage. I can't think why you persist in being so prejudiced against him.'

'Indeed, I am not prejudiced. I only said that I regretted his placing himself in a false position.'

'That is just what I complain of in you. You *will* not see that it is circumstances that have placed him in a false position. The fact is, you don't know how perplexing life is to a man.'

'Poor Egmont!' said Laura, glad to divert the conversation into another channel. 'Is it very perplexing to you?'

'Not more so I suppose than to most men. But, I say, Laura, don't you think you might persuade my mother to have a pleasant party in the house at Christmas? It is generally so frightfully dull, and my mother can't bear us not to be here, and yet I really don't see how we can be expected to stay in the house if we may

not do anything jolly. I don't believe it would do my father any harm if we had a ball. He really likes to see people about, though he fancies he doesn't. That's one reason why I asked Herne to come back—my father likes him. However, we won't go back to that subject.'

And then they wandered away into discussion of who might be asked to the house, and what might be done for the entertainment of their guests when they should be gathered together. And Laura promised to do her best to persuade her father and mother. And she kept her promise faithfully.

Willing as she always was to forward any wish of Egmont's, it must be admitted that she prosecuted the idea of filling the house at Christmas-time with an energy and persistence most unusual in her. She coaxed her father into consent, reasoned

away all her mother's objections,—promising to take upon herself all trouble of preparation and responsibility of entertainment,—was seized with a sudden passion for charades and dancing, and contrived to communicate her enthusiasm to Cassandra. She found an unexpectedly ally in Rhoos, whose view, expressed in a letter from Paris, was that Christmas being a dreary infliction to be borne somehow, it was desirable to have a lot of people in the house during the festival to drown melancholy in noise—as Indians are said to collect tum-tum men around their Suttee sacrifices. He even promised to make the gathering a condition of his presence at Ardgwen; and by this stroke quite vanquished Lady St. Asaph, who would have invited all England to her house if by so doing she could have ensured getting her son to come at the Christmas season.

The only point in the programme that they failed to carry between them was the ball. Lord St. Asaph could be got to look with favour on the assembling of a merry party of young people under his roof, so long as it was well understood that it was a family party ; but a ball to which all the county should be formally invited was not to be thought of. The idea of the ball was therefore abandoned, or rather, like many great ideas that have startled the world from the Empire of Alexander downwards, it disappeared in its integrity to be revived in less imposing parts. It seemed sufficiently within the term of a family party to need no new reference to head-quarters, that there should be informal dancing every other night in the old banqueting-hall, and that a few specially intimate friends from the neighbourhood should be invited to swell the number in the house.

And with the tacit consent of their mother and the assumed acquiescence of their father, Egmont and Laura rode from house to house, giving verbal invitations for one night or another to almost all the people whom they had originally thought of asking together. Festivities were to begin a few days before Christmas and to be kept up actively till New Year's Day, when the guests would disperse and the party from Ardgwen were invited for a few days to Llanoun—the Tremadocs being unable to spend Christmas at the castle.

And so when Herne arrived on Christmas Eve he found the household entirely metamorphosed. In place of the quiet family circle with whom he had grown intimate during his autumn visit, he found a houseful of people, almost all strange to him, but intimate with one another with the intimacy of blood-

relationship. There was a strong county and family tone about the house; conversation ran in family channels of discussion of people unknown to him and of interests in which he had no part. For though the Gwynnes were open-minded and could look beyond the windows of their castle upon the world of human interests, they belonged enough to their own world to fall naturally into its tone on suitable occasions. Herne felt himself an outsider, and though his hosts were uniformly kind and friendly to him, he had a sense of being neglected. His especial grievance, though he would not allow it to himself, was that Laura was almost inaccessible. Young lady cousins engrossed her all the morning, cousins of the other sex were eager to secure her as a partner in the evening dances, to be at her side on horseback, or hold her hand on the ice; nephews

and nieces took possession of her at luncheon, and by their constant demands upon her attention made it impossible for her to join in general conversation. Herne could have forgiven her for being constantly engaged, but he could not forgive her for looking so happy while he was feeling mortified.

He was not, however, quite without consolation. For on the rare occasions when they were thrown together in such a way as made conversation inevitable, he could not but observe that her manner towards him was different from her manner towards others. She seemed more eager to talk and less content to be merely talked to, as if she cared that he should really know her thought: whereas, with others, she seemed only concerned to hear what they had to say and to give such sympathy as they might require. For instance, she would begin suddenly,

‘Oh Mr. Herne, I have been wanting to tell you,’—and then would follow a little story of her experience since they had met, bearing on something he had said ; or an allusion to a book he had recommended : delightful indications that she distinguished him among the others, and that his influence had become one of the continuous threads of her existence.

It was a pity he could not know that when she was smiling most sweetly upon others and entering gaily into conversation for which he did not care, the sweetness and radiance that tormented him owed their origin to his presence, under the influence of which she felt herself expanding into fuller enjoyment than she had known for weeks ;—a pity, not only for his sake, but for Laura’s, whose gladness was many a time checked by seeing him looking depressed and abstracted. ‘Like a mute at a wedding,’

Egmont said,—and he added that he should have given him credit for being able to enjoy himself like a reasonable man, and that he was beginning to think him a prig after all. But Laura felt rebuked by his gravity, and found herself once more questioning her own right to be happy.

It was New Year's Eve, the day before the party was to break up. The hall was decorated with flowers and evergreens; wax-lights burned in the old silver sconces on the walls; the number of dancers was double what it had been on any former night. It was almost a ball; and all the more successful for its impromptu character, which kept down expectation and disposed everybody to be easily gratified. Musicians had been hired from Cresford, and Cassandra, who had hitherto taken on herself the part of playing, was free to dance among the rest.

She was looking more than usually handsome, and winning as much admiration as Laura herself. People amused themselves with discussing which was the more beautiful—some giving the palm to the girlish charms of Laura, others to the more mature beauty of Cassandra.

Maurice Herne, standing moodily in a doorway, watched first one and then the other with wondering annoyance. The scene looked foolish to him, as scenes of frivolity are apt to look when we are out of temper; and it passed his understanding that sensible people should find delight in it. He had not danced himself for years—he had got out of the habit of ball-going in his hard-working days and had never resumed it. And though his abstinence was mainly the result of circumstances, that did not prevent his regarding the enjoyment of others from a position of critical supe-

rriority. As the Frenchman decided that music was an illusion when old age had deprived him of hearing, so Herne, having forgotten the pleasures of rhythmic movement, judged that to whirl one another round on a polished floor was a pastime in which only fools could find satisfaction. I hope it will not be considered an inconsistency in him that he rather envied the fools in their folly.

Laura came up and asked him why he did not dance.

‘You cannot think how delightful it is on this smooth oak floor. It is like swimming away into heaven. . . . But I believe you think it silly,—if not wrong,’ she added wistfully.

‘Not in the least ; I merely envy those who enjoy it.’

‘But why should not you enjoy it? It is much better to enjoy than to envy. Will you let me find you a partner?’

You shall have Eva Courtenay, who dances like a fairy.'

'Is it too much to ask that you should take my conversion in hand yourself? Will you give me the next dance?'

'I wish I could, but I am engaged.'

'And for the dance after that?'

'I am afraid I am engaged for all the rest of the evening. But *do* ask Eva.'

Eva Courtenay was the prettiest of a trio of pretty, fair-haired girls—nieces of Lord St. Asaph—who were staying in the house. Egmont had been paying her great attention throughout the visit, and they had danced almost every dance together that evening. Now, however, she appeared to be disengaged, and was sitting by her mother while couples were sorting themselves and getting into place. But as Laura spoke, Egmont was seen approaching her, and Herne said,—

‘You see Miss Courtenay is also engaged. It is too late for repentance.’

Then Laura’s partner claimed her, and Herne, falling back into the doorway, saw her carried past him in the dance.

‘Since when have you renounced dancing?’ asked Cassandra’s voice in an amused tone. She was sitting on a bench near the door and had overheard the little dialogue with Laura.

‘Since I lost the power of enjoying it. It is a taste one outgrows.’

‘I have not outgrown it yet, and I have had more of it than you have.’

‘I can only congratulate you on your more enduring youth.’

‘Pray don’t look so melancholy,’ said Cassandra; ‘your tragic air is attracting general attention. An old lady has been asking Rhooos confidentially who the sombre-looking man standing in the doorway is; and I have had to give up

this dance in order to reassure her about you. She thought you must be plotting instant destruction of Church and State, and was on the point of ordering her carriage before supper.'

'It is my misfortune to look savage when I am bored.'

'But why be bored when everybody else is happy?'

'I was meditating on the hackneyed theme of mutability.'

'The occasion that suggested it being——?'

'The difference in the appearance of this house to-night and when I was here in the autumn.'

'And of course you think the change is not for the better?'

'I certainly found it pleasanter in the autumn. I am out of my element in the midst of all this rejoicing.'

'Rejoicing is the right thing at

Christmas-time,' said Cassandra. 'I like it.'

Herne shrugged his shoulders. 'Again I can only congratulate you.'

He spoke with an air of profound dejection, at which Cassandra could not refrain from smiling.

'I seem to amuse you,' he said.

'Yes, you do. You remind me of old times and tempt me to give myself airs again and lecture you. Shall I?'

'By all means. You will make me feel young again.'

'And am I to be candid—to speak the truth and the whole truth?'

'Certainly.'

'For instance, may I say that I think it is rather unreasonable of you to be put out at finding yourself a less important person here now than you were six months ago?'

Cassandra gave her homethrust in a

bantering tone, and then looked up apologetically, doubtful how it would be taken.

‘You are as unmerciful as ever,’ said Herne.

‘I am rude,’ she said.

But she did not look rude. Her face wore an expression of affectionate solicitude, and there were tears in her eyes.

She repeated, ‘I was rude, and I beg your pardon. To tell the truth, I quite agree with you in hating nothing so much as a houseful of people that I don’t know. But I do happen to know these people, and I can enjoy myself among them. Besides, I have an insatiable love of dancing.’

‘You would have liked to dance this?’

‘I would rather talk.’

‘What shall we talk about?’

‘Anything you like. Do you know, by-the-by, that you have a great deal to answer for with regard to Egmont?’

He has changed his politics and become a Liberal since he made your acquaintance, and he is continually coming out with startling notions which he backs up with your authority. You have become a sort of pope with him.'

Herne laughed. And then going back to the subject of his own thoughts, he said,—

'I am coming round to your opinion that friendship is a mistake between people who belong to different worlds.'

'I am afraid it is,' said Cassandra; 'or rather it is an impossibility. To be friends, people must have a common ground in their every-day life. And yet I don't know that the truth of the matter is not that the consciousness of belonging to different worlds only lasts till people have become friends.'

'Certainly,' said Herne, 'there have been strong friendships between people

at opposite poles of society; and not friendships only, but marriages which have proved happy.'

Cassandra was doubting what to answer, when the music stopped, and the dancers interrupted their *tête-à-tête* by passing through the door to seek cooler air in the galleries and on the staircase.

But Herne was not disposed to be interrupted altogether. It was the first time Cassandra had allowed herself to be drawn into anything like intimate talk with him since he had arrived. She had been designedly repellent in her manner towards him, warding off by an air of studied indifference the danger of being led into any betrayal of her real feelings. And, as it was her good or ill fortune to be an excellent actress, Herne had been taken in. He believed that his early love for her had died long ago, and he had never thought that she had repaid it with more

than friendship. But he had valued her friendship, and it was not without regret that he observed her determination to keep him at a distance. He would not let slip this opportunity of recovering their old footing.

‘ Shall we move too ? ’ he said, offering her his arm and leading her, not towards the galleries whither the dancers were making their way, but across the stone passage into the library where no one was.

Cassandra let herself be led away without reflecting that she was drifting into the very danger that she had been taking so much trouble to avoid. Her mind at the moment was turned upon another danger—not to herself—which she was anxious if possible to avert. During the six weeks that had passed between Herne’s two visits she had come to see his attitude towards Laura in another

light than that in which it had first struck her. It was clear to her that Laura's feelings were seriously engaged, but it was by no means clear to her that happiness would result from the attachment. She foresaw opposition from Lord St. Asaph, besides other difficulties which appeared to her insuperable. Herne's allusion to marriages between people at opposite social poles suggested to her the possibility of saying a word of timely warning. As they sat down in the empty room she said,—

‘ You were going to speak of marriages between people who belong to different worlds. I think they make a case apart from friendship ; for in marriage one world or the other must be given up,—either husband or wife adopting the life of the other. But I should think that it was generally a dangerous experiment. Few natures are vigorous enough to

thrive in an atmosphere that is wholly foreign.'

She waited for him to answer, but he was silent; and she repented having spoken, wishing herself back among the others.

'Are you going to Llanoun?' she asked, abruptly.

'I am. Are you?'

'No; I have had rejoicing enough.'

'But surely this is a sudden determination. Lady Laura told me you were to be there.'

'I have written to Sarah that I am not coming.'

'But that is a pity. Can't you be persuaded to change your mind?'

'Much would depend on the arguments used.'

'If I said that it was a great disappointment to me that you would not be there, would that have any effect?'

‘No,’ she said, a sudden resentment mastering her. ‘It would not make the slightest difference, because I should not believe it.’

Herne was not sure whether she was in jest or earnest; and, had her presence of mind not deserted her, she might yet have made a safe retreat. But she had spoken under the influence of one of those impulses common to passionate natures, that urge them to break down shams and face real issues in naked truthfulness; and having spoken, she felt that further dissimulation was useless, and she went on recklessly.

‘Maurice,’ she said bitterly, ‘why should we play at hide-and-seek together—we who understand one another so well? You need not be afraid. I have no intention of speaking of myself beyond asking you not to insult me any more with insincere speeches like your last.

It is about Laura that I am going to speak. You are playing with her unfairly—you are upsetting her peace of mind without having any definite prospect of being able to restore it. You know that you are not in a position to marry her,—that my uncle would turn you out of the house if you proposed such a thing,—and yet you hang about her and let her get fond of you. Of your own part in it I say nothing, though it is pitiable enough that you should waste your time in dreaming about a woman who is utterly out of your reach. It is of *her* happiness that I am thinking. . . . You are going to Llanoun. Have you realised what you are doing? Have you considered that Laura cannot be your wife without either outraging all the traditions of her family or being a stranger at your hearth? If she were to adopt your views she would cut her-

self off from her own people—if she did not adopt them, you would both be miserable. It is folly to think of it !’

‘But I tell you,’ said Herne, ‘that I have *not* thought of it.’

‘Then I say it is greater folly still to drift into danger without thinking of it.’

‘Are you sure the danger does not lie wholly in your imagination ?’

‘My imagination shows it me perhaps, but it does not create it. Imagination is no bad prophet ; and if I have too much, I only wish I could give you a little of it in place of some of your short-sighted man’s wisdom.’

‘I think you are presuming too much upon our friendship, Cassandra. . . .’

He began severely, but his tone quickly changed ; and Cassandra felt that it was in tenderness and not in anger that he broke off. She answered sadly,—

‘It is possible. But I care for Laura,

and I cannot be silent when I feel that to speak may perhaps save her from the misery that I foresee for her in any development of her feeling for you. Yes, I say it advisedly—*misery*. You do not know her as I know her ; and you think, perhaps, because she talks little of her religious beliefs and is happy in small things, that she is indifferent to greater ones. But you are mistaken. Hers is just one of those sensitive minds to which, while the world is what it is, some faith in a better world is a necessary condition of happiness. She is happy now almost without knowing why, but if you took from her her belief in God and Heaven she would wither like a flower in drought. And if you think that she would be content to worship without you, I tell you again that you are mistaken. And I know what I am talking about. I know what

it is to stand alone, to believe alone. . . .
I know it as you cannot know it—as only
those can know who have been lonely
all their lives Oh, Maurice!’

She broke down suddenly, and the last
word came with a sob.

She had not meant to speak of herself,
she had said truly that it was love for
Laura and solicitude on her account that
had prompted her to speak her warning.
For during the last few weeks she had
faced and conquered the unworthy
jealousy that had taken her soul by
storm in the hour when she realised
that Maurice’s affection was transferred
from herself to her cousin: she had
put her foot upon the neck of her un-
requited love and trampled it in the
dust of repentance. But our mortified
egoisms live on underfoot, writhing be-
neath the pressure of our will, ready
to start up again the moment our watch-

fulness, is relaxed, and surprise us perhaps in some cunning disguise of disinterested care for the welfare of another. Affection for Laura had been the prompter. But the cue given, words had come to her as to an actor who has brooded over his part till each pregnant word calls up the next, and the effort of memory is reduced to kindling the first of a chain of linked emotions. It was her own experience that had taught her to fear for her cousin; how then could she plead for Laura without pleading indirectly for herself? How could thoughts forged in the fire of her own trial find utterance and not show marks of their origin?

In thinking she could speak and yet keep her secret, she had over-estimated her strength; and she read her failure in the compassion that looked from Maurice's eyes.

Her words came to him as an appeal from a soul in anguish, and with them a rush of influence from the past went over him—strong, irresistible as the avalanche that sweeps the mountain's side with the force of a long winter's gathered snows.

‘Cassandra,’ he said in a low voice, ‘you have only to say one word, and I will stay away from Llanoun, and Laura shall be saved from all risk of pain. I am sincere now, and it rests with you to keep me so. Will you believe me?’

He was bending over her. She felt his breath upon her forehead; his hand was laid on hers. But her eyes were fixed upon her lap. She dared not lift them to meet his.

‘Cassandra,’ he said again, ‘will you trust me?’

The tones of his voice thrilled her like exquisite music. But she could not

answer. Wonder, joy, shame held her fast. . . .

‘Cassandra,’ said another voice,—Laura’s,—speaking from the door.

And Cassandra made haste to disengage her hand, pretending confusedly that a bracelet had got unclasped and was being adjusted.

‘I have been looking for you everywhere,’ said Laura. ‘We want to dance Sir Roger, and Rhooos says he is engaged to you and will not dance with anybody else. Come quickly, we are all waiting.’

The two women went away together—Laura apparently without having even noticed Herne’s presence, Cassandra without giving him a parting look.

An hour later the hall was deserted, the wax candles were blown out and stood corpse-like in their sconces. Movement of bright dancers and murmur of voices were gone, and the great

chamber was once more tenanted by the silence and emptiness that were its usual occupants. The last carriage had rolled away through falling snow; the ladies of the house had retired to their rooms; the men were lingering over the hall-fire, preparatory to a retreat to the smoking-room.

‘Where is Herne?’ asked Rhoos.

‘He went to bed an hour ago with a bad headache,’ said Egmont. ‘He seemed out of sorts all the evening, and he asked me to make his excuses if any one noticed his absence. Heigh-ho! let’s have a smoke.’



CHAPTER III.

‘When a man is disappointed in a woman, it pleases him to think her hateful and to pray to be delivered from her. But to have loved a woman once is to have a capacity for loving her again.

‘Now to love life is like loving a woman.’

SASSANDRA did not go to bed after the dance. She sat through the hours between night and morning, looking out on the white snow scene. And as she watched the slow fall of flake on flake, she seemed to gather a sad consolation from the noiseless monotony of their descent. Like the merciful veil of forgetfulness in death to the fevered follies of human life, seemed that white covering settling

silently on hill and valley and garden lawn, and wrapping in a common garment of loveliest purity castle and cottage and spreading tree and creeping ivy.

‘Oh if I could only die to-night!’ she murmured to herself—‘die and escape the shame of to-morrow—die and be forgiven for all my blunders, and remembered only as the dead are, with tenderness and pity. Oh if I could only die and be at rest!’

Poor troubled spirit—the rest of death is far away from you as yet! Far from those vigorous rounded limbs through which the pulses of life send the blood coursing with such force that even in the fireless room where the water is freezing in the ewer, the hands that grasp each other in the darkness are warm to their own touch; far from the glowing beauty of the face that presses itself in agony against the window-pane; very far

from the busy activity of the brain that gives such intolerable point to suffering, and scares away rest by its impatience of the inevitable pauses of life. Death is not coming yet. To-morrow and many morrows more must be met, with the shame they may bring, and the sorrow, and the joy. The hours pass slowly, and the church clock sounds their flight with a dull uncertain voice at intervals that seem like centuries ; but they are passing surely, and the morning will come from beyond the hills, and you will be full of life and health to meet it, and you will wrestle with it as you have wrestled with the long train of yesterdays that lie behind you—wounded often and nigh to despair, but never quite overthrown or wholly without hope. And you will rejoice in the blue sky and the sunshine and the sparkle of the diamond underfoot ; and you will thank death for having

spared you, and love life again despite the shame. Nay, are you not beginning to love it again already as you watch the successive kindling of lights in cottage bedrooms where labourers are wakening to the day's toil? Is there not in the feeble radiation of those smoky candles a message of sympathy that pierces the dark loneliness of your heart and calls you back to fellowship with lives of men and women whom you know, and have helped many a time in their hour of trouble, and are planning even now to help again? Can you be heartily praying for death and quite sated with the light of living day while that glad smile breaks over your tired face at sight of what is happening on the top of the eastern slope?

The snow-flakes have ceased to fall, and the dim sky-curtain is suffused with fairest radiance. The snow on the pine-

tops is turned to tawny gold, and the grey old castle glitters like an aërial palace of glass. Morning has come at last ; and its lap is full of healthful influences of work and hope and interest.

Cassandra rouses herself and strikes a light ; for in spite of the gilding on the hill-top and the bright reflection from the outer snow, the room is too dim for the operations of the toilet to be carried on without the help of a candle.

She looks at her watch that lies on the table where she laid it last evening before dressing for the dance at the castle ; it has stopped, she must have neglected to wind it up on coming home. She strips herself hastily of her ball-gown and ornaments, and dresses herself in her usual morning gown. She moves quickly about the room, doing each little office with precision and energy, but with a mind apparently intent upon other things.

Her movements are strenuous because a strong resolution is forming in her mind, but the resolution has nothing to do with the trivial acts to which it lends its character.

By the time she is dressed the church clock strikes eight; she sets her watch by it and then sits down and writes a short note. There are hardly a dozen lines in it and they are written without hesitation, for they embody the thought that has been taking shape in her mind ever since the light began to dawn upon the castle slope. They are a translation into daylight sanity of the wild longing of the night for death and oblivion:—

‘Will you try to forget what passed last night? I was weak, and my weakness betrayed me into mad words. I only ask you now to make no attempt to see me before you go to Llanoun, and

to remember that it is in your power to hurt Laura.—C. G.’

She folds the note without even reading it through, as if she feared the temptation to destroy it. Then, wrapping herself in a cloak, she goes out into the passage where the housemaid is busy with her broom, down the staircase, and forth into the white outside world. The rectory does not breakfast till nine, and if she walks briskly she will have time to carry her note to the castle and get home again before the family assembles for prayers.

Very cheerless the scene looked now, for the brightness of dawn had faded from the sky which stretched overhead, an unbroken sheet of dingy grey. The snow was falling again, and the flakes settled fast on her cloak and hat, and drifted coldly against her unprotected

face. But she did not heed them. She walked resolutely on with an expression of sad but firm purpose that seemed in harmony with the grim sunlessness of the scene.

The note was delivered to a footman in shirt-sleeves, who promised to give it to Herne as soon as he should be up, and looked not a little surprised to see Cassandra abroad so early after the dissipation of last night. And when Mrs. Gwynne came down with the keys of the tea-chest, Cassandra was already in the dining-room, waiting for breakfast and ready to talk over the incidents of the dance, as if there had been no special incident of which the remembrance was painful to her.

But when breakfast was over she put her cloak on again, and without saying a word to any one, went forth once more into the snow—not this time on a definite

errand, but merely that she might spend in physical exercise the throbbing energy within her, and find soothing for her pain among the sweeping curves of hill-lines and the southing of snow-laden pine-branches.

She walked up the hill that faced the castle, and when she reached the top she paused for a few minutes, sending her eye along the path she had taken before breakfast as if she expected to see some one retracing the track of her footsteps in the snow. But if so, her glance was disappointed; for it was not till she was halfway down the other side of the hill that Maurice left the breakfast-table, saying that he was going to the rectory to take leave of his uncle and aunt before starting for Llanoun.



CHAPTER IV.

‘He swears that all the men of his country are constant.’

‘Marry then, I think that one of them swears false.’

‘His reason is that all the women are of one complexion.’

‘Marry then, I think he may speak truth.’

‘**A**SSANDRA is out,’ said Anna Gwynne as Herne was ushered into the rectory drawing-room.

‘She has gone on one of her mad errands through the snow.’ She spoke in the even, inexpressive tones that were habitual with her—looking her cousin straight in the face, but without betraying any special curiosity or suspicion.

Herne however knew her too well to doubt the point of her announcement. He understood what she meant him to understand, namely that she was perfectly aware that he had come there for the purpose of seeing Cassandra, and that Cassandra had gone out in order to avoid him. He knew also that ideas, once admitted into Anna's mind, were not easily displaced, and he made no attempt directly or indirectly to disclaim the object of his visit. He merely said,—

‘I hope your father and mother are not out too. I have come to say good-bye before starting for Llanoun.’

‘No, they are at home—I will tell them you are here.’ And Anna went out of the room to summon her parents. She returned in a minute saying they would come presently—her father was giving instructions to the clerk about

the week's services, her mother was ordering dinner. She sat down on an armless chair at some distance from Herne, and, taking some needlework from her pocket, began sewing diligently—leaving it to him to find conversation.

‘How is it that neither you nor Cassandra are going to Llanoun?’ he asked.

Addressed to Anna, the question was a safe one; there was no danger of her being carried into one of those embarrassing utterances of the whole truth to which Cassandra was prone. Anna, like all people of narrow outlook, had an instinctive and quite unconscious dislike of truth—that is to say, of all truth that she had not weighed and measured and followed in thought into its uttermost consequences. She prided herself on being matter-of-fact, and limited fact to matter within her own ken.

And though her want of imagination prevented her from ever seeing anything in a true light, she believed herself to be the one entirely truthful person in the world.

She answered Herne's question without lifting her eyes from her work.

'I do not go because I take no interest in Sarah's hobbies, and they are always more than usually rampant at this time of the year. And as for Cassandra, her reasons are always beyond the comprehension of the rest of the family. For my part, I have given up trying to understand them.'

The steely coldness of her tone connected itself in Herne's mind with Cassandra's appeal of the night before for those whom fate has made lonely in their lives. He looked at Anna with amazement, as wondering that any woman should be so little human, and felt

a deepened compassion for Cassandra.

And yet Anna was perhaps not less entitled to sympathy than Cassandra. She suspected rightly that Cassandra's staying away from Llanoun had reference to something that had gone wrong in her relations with Maurice, but what that something was she was unable to guess. And she was hurt that Cassandra had not confided in her. Not unnaturally; for we cannot expect people to recognise their incapacity for the part of confidant when the very cause of it lies in their defect of the delicate perceptions and quick sympathies that belong to a wide-ranging imagination. If it was impossible for Cassandra to unbosom herself to Anna, it was equally impossible for Anna not to resent Cassandra's reserve. There would seem to be in the world an irreconcilable quarrel between width and narrowness to which one can see no end

save in the final strangling or absorption of one or other force; and, in the meanwhile, it is difficult to say on which side justice and mercy oftenest fail.

Herne took up a book and made no further attempt at conversation. Anna stitched on industriously.

It was a relief when Mrs. Gwynne came in full of affectionate greetings and cheery interest in the expedition to Llanoun. She was sorry Anna and Cassandra were not going—but there was no use in her saying anything. They were both so much firmer than she was, and no doubt had good reasons for staying at home—there was always a great deal to be done at this time of the year with the clothing-club and coal-club, and now that Lady St. Asaph was so much taken up with Lord St. Asaph she did not know what she should do if her daughters did not help

her. Still she was sorry. It would have been a pleasant time for them, and she would have enjoyed thinking of them all together at Llanoun. How long was Maurice going to stay there?—had he ever been there before? No?—then he would be very much interested. Sarah was so clever in her arrangements. Her home was quite an Utopia—so indeed was the whole parish. And Mr. Tremadoc was such a kind, pleasant person. Perhaps it was quite as well that he did not go quite so far as some people did about reform,—it was a sort of check on Sarah. Indeed Mrs. Gwynne sometimes thought that it was owing to his influence that Sarah was so much the most charming of the three sisters—though they were all charming in their way. But she could not help thinking that Mary was a little too scientific and political for a woman, and that

Rachel would do more good if she concentrated her energies on some individual parish instead of belonging to so many Societies. But then, to be sure, Rachel lived in London almost all the year and had not the same opportunities as her sister. One must not judge. . . .

Mrs. Gwynne talked on pleasantly, taking kindly views of everything and everybody, while Anna sat back, sewing with undivided attention, and Herne just put in a word here and there. If he had shown any inclination to talk at greater length, Mrs. Gwynne would have been as content to listen as she now was to talk. She always took the part in life that was left by others, and cheerfully made the best of it. She talked on till her husband came in, with his great-coat on and his hat in his hand, to ask her what in the world she had done with

the accounts of the clothing-club. He wanted them instantly, and it was really most annoying that his papers never could be left where he put them.

What Mrs. Gwynne had done with the accounts was to keep them very carefully all the year round and to balance them accurately only ten days ago. They were safely and handily stored in a drawer of her writing-table, and were produced without a moment's delay. Mr. Gwynne took them impatiently, just glanced at the last written page, gave a grunt which seemed to say that, thank Heaven, they were not this time in such utter confusion as might have been expected; and was going out of the room without having spoken a word to Herne. When the rector was busy he was not very mindful of the dues of others, especially of people against whom he had a grudge.

His wife recalled him to courtesy:

‘Harvey, you are forgetting that Maurice will be gone before you come in.’

‘Oh, I thought you would be here to luncheon probably,’ he said, taking his wife’s hint, without, however, acknowledging it by look or gesture. (The part left for Mrs. Gwynne in married life included much trouble and little thanks.) ‘I’m sorry I cannot stay, but I’m obliged to walk up to the schools immediately. I suppose it would not suit you to walk so far with me?’

The invitation was not given very graciously, but Herne accepted it all the same, not being desirous of prolonging his visit at the rectory. He walked up to the schools with his uncle, who discoursed much, by the way, on the impossibility of getting anything to go right in a parish where Methodism had once set its foot. ‘I declare,’ he said, warming to his subject and growing confidential

in the absence of contradiction,—for Herne, absorbed by other thoughts, did not trouble himself to argue, but listened in silence, which his uncle was at liberty to interpret as he liked,—‘I declare I would rather they were all rank atheists—one knows what to be at with a man like Heasman there. But these ranters, with their texts and their hypocritical psalm-singing, bewilder the people till they don’t know their right hand from their left, and can’t see that insubordination isn’t Christianity. And what increases tenfold the difficulty of dealing with them is that you can never get a woman to see this question of dissent in a reasonable light.’ It was ungrateful of Mr. Gwynne to say this, for Anna saw the question in exactly the same light that he did, which was what he meant by a reasonable light. But the rector was of an exacting temper that

disposed him to value little the easily won agreement of persons likeminded with himself; he regarded their opinions as mere subsidiary clauses included in his own convictions, while the opinions of those who did not agree with him, though worthless in themselves, were so many affronts to his importance which he could not afford to overlook. The result was that the feelings of Mrs. Gwynne and Cassandra were taken as representative of the feelings of all women, while those of Anna were simply ignored. So Mr. Gwynne considered that no woman could be got to see Dissent in its true colours, because as he told Maurice, 'Nothing that I can say will hinder my wife from behaving in the same way to the Dissenters and the Church people. And Cassandra is as bad; she has not left me a moment's peace this week because I have advised my clerk,'—Mr. Gwynne

always said *my* clerk and *my* church and *my* schoolmaster,—‘because I have advised my clerk not to let a cottage of his, that has just fallen vacant, to a dissenting family up at the other end of the village. But I am forgetting that you will probably take her side.’

‘I am afraid I should,’ said Herne; ‘but I have not time this morning to discuss the question. I ought to be getting back to the castle.’

‘Ah, well! good-bye. I am glad to have seen you again. I suppose you are likely to be in these parts again some of these days?’

‘I suppose so,’ said Herne, though in truth that was a point he had been revolving in his mind with much uncertainty, as he walked from the rectory to the school, and continued to revolve with unceasing perplexity in the course of the further walk from the school to the castle.

Since last evening, he had come to see at least a prophetic truth in the words Cassandra had spoken on the evening of his first coming to Ardgwen. He had no business there, and must either make this visit his last or come back as the declared suitor of one or other of the women whose affections he had engaged.

He had come to one of those cross-roads of life where every course points to an event for which, when it is accomplished, we must ever feel remorse, though our self-reproach becoming articulate has no severer rebuke for us than the simple statement that we ought to have been elsewhere. The false position in which he undeniably stood towards both Laura and Cassandra was only so far his fault that it resulted from the inaction and indecision that had crippled all his career. It was one of those remote

consequences of omission—sad children of our unfaithfulness—that persistently reveal themselves to our confusion and dishonour, claiming equal descent with the more creditable results of action to which we are so proud to give our name. We try to disown them, we appeal to the world whether they are like us—like our promises, our principles, our intentions. And the world answers with a sneer that they are very like us—like our weakness and our waywardness and our neglected opportunities. The parentage is proved, and the past hangs as a millstone round our neck.

Herne hardly attempted to justify himself in his present dilemma. He was more concerned to discover the way out of it—more anxious if possible to console Cassandra than to establish that she was to blame for needing consolation. He could not turn with indifference

from the desolate life that had cried involuntarily to his. He could not find much satisfaction in the reflection that, had her attitude been less enigmatical seven years ago, events would have taken a different course and their united lives might have achieved all that they had failed in singly.

He asked himself why the union might not be even now. Cassandra was the same woman at thirty that he had loved at three-and-twenty. He still admired her, he still desired her friendship, he still courted her approval and winced under her reproach. But it was no longer Cassandra but Laura who appeared to him as the inspiring angel of new beginnings.

Not that he had ever definitely proposed to himself to make Laura his wife ; the difficulties that Cassandra had pointed out with such merciless truth-

fulness had been tacitly recognised by him all along, and though he could not conceal from himself that every thought of new effort had been lately linked with thought of Laura, he had been content hitherto to couple himself with her in vague dreams. Now however words had been spoken which brought the question out of the region of dreams. Cassandra had told him plainly that Laura cared for him, and it behoved him as an honourable man either to come forward definitely and take his chance of winning her in spite of the objections he anticipated from her family, or to withdraw altogether and allow her to recover from the impression he had made upon her feelings before it had deepened to an enduring scar.

His purpose in going to see Cassandra had not been very clearly stated to himself. But he had hoped by a quiet

interview with her to arrive at a more accurate measure of his feelings than he was conscious of possessing at present. Having missed her, he thought the best thing he could do was to carry out his intention of going to Llanoun.



CHAPTER V.

‘The April’s in her eyes ; it is Love’s spring,
And these the showers to bring it on.’

TLANOUN was certainly a very pleasant house to stay in and Lady Sarah a most charming hostess. So said all the world, and so thought Maurice Herne, to whom it seemed that in coming to the Tremadocs’ he had travelled back to the pleasant time of his autumn visit to Ardgwen.

Lady Sarah received him with entire cordiality, taking up the subjects they had discussed together at the point where they had left them, and, by her eagerness to show him the working of

her schemes and her solicitude for his approval of them, making him feel that her interest in him had been a genuine one, and not merely a passing fancy to be forgotten in a succession of other intercourses.

Lady Sarah was rather famous for her friendships. She attracted to herself people of marked individuality, and made firm alliances with them in spite of wide differences of character and conviction. She would say, 'I am I—you are you. I have no theories, I belong to no school. I never made a proselyte in my life and never mean to let any one make one of me. But it amuses me to look at the world through other people's spectacles, and I like all people who have the sense to be themselves.' What she liked in others she realised in her own life, and her great charm probably came from the instinctive wisdom with which she always

was herself. To it doubtless was due the great success that attended all her undertakings and seemed a quality of her mind communicating itself to her work rather than a happy crowning from without; and from it resulted a certain artistic completeness in her life and character which disarmed criticism and won approval even from those whose most cherished prejudices she ventured to oppose. Her frank disclaimer of any regulating principle beyond her taste and of any test outside experience, gave to all she said and did the character of an exception, which like all exceptions might be considered to prove the rule it broke. And so when she ran a tilt against conventionalities, the most conventional people felt that they might give a rare indulgence to their natural man and admire the hardy stroke, fearless of establishing a dangerous precedent. If

she wanted to know people who were not entitled to be known in her section of society, she said, not 'The So-and-so's are worthy people and ought to be invited,' but 'I like them, and I want to have them at my parties.' If she wished to reform the dress of her housemaid, she did not denounce the iniquity of fashion out of place, but attacked a special gown as unbecoming, and suggested in its place some garment of her own contriving, possibly a pattern from her own wardrobe which she had already recommended by wearing it herself. If she wanted her husband to make any new arrangements on his estate, to improve cottages or build new ones, she begged the reform as a gratification of a personal whim, and seldom failed to gain her point. And so it came about that, though she made no proselytes, she obtained much influence and made her

mark on all around her. And at the same time, by dint of looking through other people's spectacles, she unconsciously borrowed much from minds unlike her own. Some conscious borrowing she did also, in the way of buying up waste talents and making people serve her ends without believing in them. All was grist that came to her mill, and many who had failed to make their talents serve ends of their own imagining, or who lacked faith in any ends to serve, were glad to do journeyman's work under so confident a head.

There was at this moment a large party assembled in the house. The Courtenays had come over with the party from Ardgwen, to the great satisfaction of Egmont, whose devotion to the pretty Eva was becoming serious. The Walworths were there, and Lady Mary Vane. Then there was a sprinkling of

friends from the outer world. Mr. Burrell Jones, a London clergyman of liberal doctrine and bright genial outlook—a massive man with a splendid physique that disposed him to æsthetic enjoyment and coloured his Christianity with a refined sensuousness that was very attractive to a prosperous generation little inclined to qualify itself for entrance into the gates of life by any process of maiming and halting. His wife, a graceful woman with pale wavy hair and placid smiles that passed for beauty with the help of a studiedly picturesque style of dress. A German lady who played the piano beautifully, but not quite beautifully enough to succeed professionally, as Lady Walworth had intended her to do, and who, having made her *début* last season in that lady's drawing-room without creating the sensation that was hoped from her, had sunk back

into obscurity, where Lady Sarah's friendship had come to her consolingly. And last but not least, Lady Sarah's sworn champion and ally, Mr. Walter Fenton, who deserves to be introduced to the reader at greater length than the other guests.

He was a man of miscellaneous talent and whimsical character whom society had once hailed as a genius, but had long given up as a riddle not to be solved. Some ten or twelve years ago he had gained a sudden fame as a painter by exhibiting at the Royal Academy a series of ideal heads of rare beauty. But since then he had done nothing, or at least had given nothing to the world. His studio was full of vague sketches and unfinished attempts, and to the few intimate friends who were admitted within it he was in the habit of defending his unproductiveness by comparing himself

to the prophet who went out to curse and was constrained to bless, with the difference that in his case he tried to bless and succeeded only in cursing. He seemed to be dominated by a genius of despair. Gifted with a body and mind tremulously sensitive to every charm of beauty in the moral and physical world, he was unable to find enjoyment anywhere by reason of a mastering sense of the transient character of all good, of the blank purposelessness of life and the futility of endeavour: every idea turned to tragedy as he dwelt on it, and subjects, chosen for their beauty as worthy of representation in art, were one after another dismissed by him, always for the same reason that some latent ugliness had revealed itself.

The friendship between Mr. Fenton and Lady Sarah was of old standing, dating as far back as her unmarried days.

And some said that he had then cherished a hopeless passion for her, and that it was her marriage with Mr. Tremadoc that was the death-blow to his career as a painter. It may have been so, but Lady Sarah certainly did not suspect the attachment, and the frankness of their relations was never impaired by it—nor did it prevent a cordial friendship between him and Mr. Tremadoc. He stayed so frequently at Llanoun that he was generally looked upon as part of the family. The children were devoted to him, and showed their devotion, after the manner of children, by making him devote himself to them. He covered the nursery walls with quaint sketches, and enlivened nursery-teas by telling fantastic fairy-stories full of grotesque humour and subtle pathos, at which they laughed and cried in turn, missing nothing but the undertone of cynicism that was never absent from any-

thing he did or said. To Lady Sarah herself he was serviceable as a mediæval knight to his mistress in chivalry, only his service was of a more useful kind than one fancies that of the errant knight to have been. He entered with a sort of impartial sympathy into her plans for the improvement of the people about her, shrugging his shoulders a little at her optimist views, but none the less ready to help her in carrying them out because he had no faith in their containing any lasting good. Lady Sarah was keen about popular education, and when first she came to Llanoun she had made great efforts to reform the teaching in the village schools. Without being at all a learned woman, she possessed that general understanding of the scope and meaning of knowledge that cultured surroundings yield so readily to women of intelligence, and her desire

was that the knowledge, which she herself rather saw than grasped, should be imparted in as full a measure as possible to all others. She had tried to start classes of elementary science, learning herself in order that she might teach; but between her own ignorance and the prejudice of others she had had little success, and for once in her life she was almost in despair. In her difficulty she had taken Mr. Fenton into counsel, and he had come very readily to her help, entering quickly into her ideas and taxing all his knowledge and his ingenuity to devise means for putting them into practice. From that time forward he was her constant counsellor in all her undertakings, and there was no smallest reform made among the villagers of Llanoun for which he was not largely responsible. It was a curious alliance this, between the practical-minded woman

moving sanely among the positive facts and healthy purposes of life, and the sceptical visionary whose life-purposes had foundered hopelessly in the deep waters of impossible dreams and ideals too fair for a world careless on the whole of bettering—an alliance not without ludicrous aspects, but at the same time full of pathetic meanings for those who had eyes to read them. To Lady Sarah herself the thing was perfectly simple; to Fenton it was not stranger than any other phenomenon of life. That doubt should work out the ends of faith, that genius should fetch and carry for common-sense, that gifts once grudged to any work short of the highest and completest should in the end be used to patch and darn the common-place life of an obscure fishing-village,—all this was but in keeping with the general irony of things in a universe of which the story

was an involved paradox and the end a blank negation.

In such a large and mixed party it was easy for Herne to carry out his resolution of holding aloof from Laura and observing her at a distance, especially as she did her best to avoid him, and threw a marked coldness into her manner on the occasions on which they inevitably came together. They both played their parts so well that they had been a week at Llanoun, meeting continually, often for hours in each other's presence, and yet no word had passed between them that was not quite common-place. Herne was to go back to London on the next day, and Laura was once more looking forward to a deliverance that would leave her desolate ; for the renewed intercourse with him had dispelled the illusion with which she had comforted herself while he was away ; and

she could no longer hide from herself that her attachment was deepening hourly, even in spite of the indifference with which he now treated her. She had no right to resent this indifference, for she had never allowed herself to think he had meant more than friendship in their former intercourse, and it was only natural that the persistent coldness of her own manner should at length have chilled his. She knew, indeed, that she ought to rejoice in it as saving her from temptations which she would have been weak to fight against, had they arisen. But to rejoice was beyond her strength,—she suffered keenly under his neglect, and in spite of all her efforts to appear happy an indefinable sadness became visible in her manner.

The difficulty of maintaining an unconscious air was increased for her by the watchful solicitude that her failing spirits awakened in her sisters. She felt

that they observed her suspiciously ; and every moment of the day became complicated for her by some new necessity of dissimulation—every simplest action was liable to be misunderstood. If she threw herself in the way of meetings with Herne, they looked at her ; if she went out of her way to avoid him, they looked at her. Only this morning she had refused to be one of a walking party because she had calculated that, in the inevitable pairing off on the road, it would fall to her lot to walk with Herne. The party consisted of Mr. Tremadoc, the Walworths, Mr. Burrell Jones, Egmont, and Eva Courtenay. Mr. Tremadoc and Lord Walworth would walk together and talk politics, Lady Walworth would take possession of Mr. Jones, and Egmont never lost an opportunity of being at Eva's side. There would be no alternative for her but to walk with

Herne ; so she made lame excuses and stayed at home.

But now as she sat by the fire, working at some embroidery for Sarah, which she had made her pretext for staying indoors, she felt that Lady Mary, sitting opposite to her, was neglecting the book in her hand to peep over its edges and discover the true reason of her refusal to go out. She worked on with increasing assiduity, but her fingers trembled, and the stitches went awry. She turned hot and cold alternately in expectation of the sermon she believed to be hatching for her ; and when at last her sister spoke, she had reached such a point of embarrassment that she did not know how to answer, though the matter was after all quite impersonal.

‘This is a very remarkable book,’ said Lady Mary ; ‘you should read it, Laura. It contains many ideas which, I feel,

would have been of inestimable value to me if I had come upon them at your age. It is the great misfortune of most women that they learn everything when it is too late.'

'What is the book about?' asked Laura.

'It is a collection of essays on various problems of life, addressed chiefly to women. There is one on waste that is excellent—most excellent: I should like to put it into the hands of every woman in the country. One on marriage, which is good also, though I think it makes too much of the superiority of the married life to the single.' (Lady Mary regarded her own matrimonial venture as the great mistake of her life, pardonable only for the sake of the right it gave her to speak depreciatingly of matrimony in general.) 'Then there is one on education,' she continued, 'which is very able; it

has some points in it that I am not aware of having ever seen stated before, and which are most important. And there are others—on health, on dress, on beauty. The essay on beauty is very striking. It justifies the love of beauty by pointing out how all true beauty has some real utility at the bottom of it—how, for instance, a fine figure is one in which all the organs of digestion and respiration have abundant room to work, and a good complexion is the normal appearance of the skin when the blood is in a healthy condition, and so on through a great variety of cases. I have always felt that there must be some solid reason for the satisfaction even superior people find in these things,—which otherwise would be so very unimportant.’

Lady Mary had looked away from Laura now, and was complacently contemplating her own person in a mirror

that hung conveniently on the opposite wall. She had the fine form and colouring that belonged to her family, and had always valued them, in spite of the early bent of her mind towards science; and while listening to lectures at the Royal Institution it had never been a matter of indifference to her that she was the handsomest woman who sat on its benches—nor was she unconscious of the becoming character of the plain black velvet gowns which she habitually wore. But vanity was a weakness inconsistent with the part in life she had chosen to play, and therefore she believed herself to be free from it. When she had satisfied herself that her figure was ample enough to allow free play to the vital organs, and her complexion of the tint produced by duly oxygenated blood, she looked back at Laura and observed that she was rather pale.

‘I think you did wrongly,’ she said, ‘in not going out this morning. You are looking rather white and pasty, as if you had not enough oxygen in your lungs.’

‘It is not natural to me to have much colour,’ Laura answered. ‘I am always pale; but I think I am very well.’

There was a slight melancholy in Laura’s voice as she said that she was always pale. Without being exactly vain, she had not formerly been discontented with her looks; but she was beginning to think rather poorly of herself now that she seemed so little attractive to another. Lady Mary noticed the melancholy note, and it confirmed her in her belief that Laura was out of health—delicate girls were always in danger of becoming sentimental.

‘It is true,’ she said, ‘that you are generally pale, but I believe it is only

because you are not strong. And I am convinced that there is nothing like morning exercise for health. That is one of the points this man emphasises most. I wish I could find the passage again to read to you—but when one wants a thing it always seems to have gone out of the book.’

Lady Mary fluttered the pages backwards and forwards, without however turning up the passage she wanted; she gave up the quest and began reading another essay. Soon she spoke again.

‘Oh, here is something else that I wanted to show you—some remarks on love, that are really wonderfully sensible. Listen,’ and she began to read: ‘“There are few reforms in the education of girls that would tend more to their happiness in after-life than a radical change in the tone of society and of books on the subject of love. To assume *à priori* that

every marriage is based on love, and that every so-called love-affair is a mysterious and sacred romance——”’

‘Oh, please don’t read any more,’ cried Laura, realising that this was the text, and that the sermon would follow immediately if she did not make an energetic protest. ‘I hate people who write in that sort of business-like way about love. It always sounds to me indecent.’

Lady Mary drew herself up a little. ‘I am sorry you think my taste in reading indecent.’

‘I beg your pardon,’ said Laura; ‘of course I did not mean that, and I daresay the man is quite right in what he says. Only I always do hate things about love—especially for reading loud. I will read it to myself if you think it would be useful.’

Laura’s penitence was genuine. She felt so utterly astray in her feelings just

now, that she was disposed to think most people knew better than herself. Only she could not undergo a discourse from the sister with whom she had least sympathy, on the subject on which she knew she would be most unsympathetic. She held out her hand for the book, but Lady Mary held it back.

‘I do not want you to read it if you are prejudiced against it. But I think it is a pity to refuse to hear things because they happen not to be on one’s own side of the question.’ And Lady Mary leaned back in her chair, and held the book up before her face as if to say that the question was settled.

Laura bent over her work, but her eyes filled with tears and she could not see to set her stitches. Suddenly she heard voices in the hall—the walkers had returned, and they would come into the room in another minute. She started

up, and, hastily collecting her working materials, made her escape through a side door—regardless of Lady Mary's observation on her eagerness to be gone before the others came.

The door by which she fled led into a long corridor at the end of which was a pretty little room that seldom was used by any one but Laura, who had got into the way of considering it her special sanctum whenever she was staying at Llanoun. Thinking to take refuge there now, she ran along the passage and opened the door hurriedly.

She had counted on finding the room empty, but to her surprise it was full of people, and she stopped confusedly on the threshold. Mr. Jones and Mr. Fenton were standing in the window discussing some designs that were scattered on a table, Mr. Jones criticizing in a loud voice and Mr. Fenton quietly defending—

while Lady Sarah was explaining to Herne in an under-tone that the designs were of Mr. Fenton's doing. Lady Walworth, seated a little apart, was watching the group with evident amusement. She was the only one who saw Laura's abrupt entrance and the confused blush and start with which she attempted to withdraw on finding the room occupied. Laura, painfully alive to her sister's observation, thought for a moment that the amused expression on Rachel's face had reference to herself. But she was quickly reassured. Rachel's humour was abundantly fed for the moment by what was passing in the window, and she was only interested in Laura's entrance in so far as it promised her sympathy in her amusement.

‘Don't run away,’ she said; ‘we are looking at the designs Mr. Fenton has made for the decoration of the schools.

This is the Palace of Truth, and we are all to speak our unvarnished opinions. Mr. Jones is getting up our courage by setting us a good example.'

'Have you seen them, Lady Laura?' said Herne, turning towards her as soon as he was conscious of her presence. He handed her one of the sketches, and his voice sounded as if he wanted to hear her opinion. A bright flush came into her cheeks, and she felt suddenly happy. Their hands touched as she took the paper from him, but she took care that their eyes should not meet.

'I am afraid my opinion will not be of any use,' she said. 'You know that I do not understand art.' She spoke to Herne and remained standing by him—he was less terrible to her than her sisters.

'I know you always say so,' he answered, 'but none of us are to be diffident

any more, for Mr. Fenton has told us that we are all to consider ourselves competent judges. He only stipulates for our speaking the truth. Is not that it ?’

‘Certainly,’ said Mr. Fenton; ‘I have great confidence in the instinctive judgments of cultivated people on matters of taste,—especially of women.’

Lady Walworth held up her hands. ‘This from you! I thought you were the sworn enemy of women-artists.’

‘So I am. Women are æsthetic but they are not artistic; they make an excellent audience, but very poor actors as a rule. Lady Laura will not suspect me of flattery, I am sure, if I say that I would rather have her good opinion of a picture I had painted than that of a whole army of male critics. And I am sure Mr. Jones will agree with me, though of course his experience lies in a different department of art.’

A smile went round the room, and then Mr. Fenton, having revenged himself on the preacher, turned quietly to Laura and began explaining to her the idea of his design. Laura had recovered self-possession by this time and she listened with interest; she entered into the subject with her usual quickness of sympathy, and made one or two suggestions that were received with decided approbation by the artist. Unconsciously she was soon taking the lead in the conversation.

‘Why, Laura,’ said Lady Sarah, ‘you are coming out in a new light. I thought you rather despised art. If I had suspected you of all these ideas I should have made you help me long ago. Don’t you agree with me, Mr. Herne, that it is very unfair to have valuable ideas and to keep them under lock and key?’

‘Certainly,’ said Herne. ‘But Lady

Laura has solemnly assured me that she knows nothing about art.'

Laura looked up at him with a perplexed smile.

'I should never have thought of calling this art,' she said.

'You are like Monsieur Jourdain,' said Fenton; 'you talk art without knowing it and so escape a great many blunders.'

It was a new sensation to Laura to find her opinion valued by her sister's clever friends, and though she blushed and felt a little confused, it was undeniably pleasant to her. She brightened up under the influence of it, and looked more than usually pretty. Herne forgot prudence and allowed himself to look at her with manifest admiration. Now that his visit to Llanoun was so nearly at an end, the resolution with which he had begun it seemed likely to be set aside.

As they left the room he joined Laura and said,—

‘I am grateful to Mr. Fenton for his theory about women. I see now that you are justified in neither painting, singing, nor playing: your part is to understand and suggest.’

Laura smiled and tried to answer, but her inspiration was at an end. She felt singularly incapable of either understanding or suggesting, and without going through the form of excusing herself, she hurried away from Herne in the direction of the drawing-room. The door was open, and, as she approached it, she caught the sound of her own name. Her sisters were all there, evidently discussing her. Without thinking what she ought to do, she stood and listened.

‘Laura herself assured me that there was nothing between them,’ Lady Sarah was saying.

‘That was three months ago,’ said Lady Walworth; ‘there has been time for a whole three-volume novel to spin itself since then. I think one of us had better speak to her.’

‘What good can we do?’ said Sarah’s voice again. ‘We shall only make her unhappy. In my opinion the kindest thing is to say nothing, but just to save her from the pain of meeting him any more. Unless, indeed, it were not better to let the thing take its course.’

There was an unusual tone of doubtfulness in Sarah’s voice as she said this. Lady Mary was the next to speak.

‘I thought you assured us just now that Laura was safe because Maurice Herne was going to marry Cassandra. He cannot marry them both; and I don’t think a course that ends in Laura’s breaking her heart about Cassandra’s husband will be very edifying. To my

mind such collisions in love are indecent.'

The last word was prompted by a spirit of retaliation. Lady Mary was still smarting under Laura's application of it to her author's manner.

'But who vouches for the attachment to Cassandra?' asked Rachel 'I should be inclined to doubt it myself. Men don't, as a rule, like that sort of incalculable woman—especially when she is nearly related to them. What have you got to go upon, Sarah?'

Sarah did not answer at once. She was realising that she had in truth very little to go upon—nothing, in fact, but Laura's belief that such an attachment existed. After a pause she said, 'Perhaps it is a mistake about Cassandra. It certainly struck me as odd that she should refuse to come here now. Perhaps there is nothing in it.'

‘It strikes me,’ said Lady Mary, ‘that it is rather derogatory to Laura’s dignity to discuss the question entirely in relation to Cassandra. This fancy for Maurice Herne is foolish in itself and ought to be discouraged on that ground alone. I was on the point of warning her this morning, but she rushed out of the room with tears in her eyes, and I thought I had better wait for another opportunity.’

‘Pray don’t speak in a hurry,’ said Sarah, who knew how terrible such speaking would probably be, and felt as much concerned for Laura as if it had been proposed to set the police upon her.

Lady Mary replied with dignity, ‘I had no intention of speaking in a hurry, and I am quite willing not to speak at all if you will undertake to stop the affair. But that it must be stopped somehow I am very certain.’

‘Why?’ said Sarah, with sudden bold-

ness. ‘Why should it be stopped? Maurice Herne is a good man and a gentleman, and we all like him, and he and Laura would suit one another. Forgive me, Mary, but I think you do not quite understand all that that means in marriage.’

Lady Sarah did not stay to see the effect of this speech. She was, in truth, a little frightened at her boldness, for Lady Mary held that sort of ascendancy over her sisters that generally belongs to the least amiable member of a family whose judgments are not to be disputed for fear of the consequences. She could not, like Sarah, look upon other people’s opinions as varieties resulting from difference of character; nor, like Rachel, as amusing vagaries giving spirit to the comedy of life. She viewed all questions with ultra-seriousness, and all her opinions were rigid as moral axioms—

deflection from which implied a precarious moral balance in the deflector. Lady Sarah had the reputation in society of being a singularly fearless woman; nevertheless this was the first time in her life that she had openly defied her eldest sister; and having done it, her next step was flight. She crossed Laura in the doorway, and they looked guiltily at one another; but neither spoke, and Laura's entrance checked further remark on the part of the other sisters.

It had been agreed that the impromptu committee who had discussed the designs in the morning should walk down to the schools directly after luncheon and meet the local decorator who was to be entrusted with the task of execution. Laura could not possibly escape being of the party; indeed, since the conversation she had overheard in the morning, her one object was to avoid *tête-à-têtes* with her

sisters, and to go out was the surest way of doing this. For Lady Mary, in spite of her theories, was lazy about walking; and Lady Walworth declared herself too tired with the exercise she had taken in the morning to go out again. She did not mind Lady Sarah; and she thought she would manage to walk chiefly with Mrs. Jones, whose absent smiles were famous for discouraging conversational attack, and with whom one might consequently walk in silence without making oneself remarkable.

Laura was not the only person who started on the walk with a private plan of action. Lady Sarah, since her open defiance of her sister's opinion, felt that it was incumbent upon her to take a decided part in Laura's love-affair, and that to this end she ought to arrive at more definite knowledge than she yet possessed of the feeling on both sides.

But she was sorely puzzled to know how to do this. From any direct questioning of her sister she shrank with an invincible repugnance. The silent mystery of maidenhood in which Laura moved was very sacred to the older woman, and to break in upon it rudely would have seemed to her a sacrilege. On the whole it appeared to her that to sound Herne would be the easier task. And she promised herself that she would make an opportunity of doing this in the course of the afternoon's walk. Accordingly she made an excuse for leaving the school before the discussion was over, and asked Herne to walk with her to a fishing hamlet about a mile away. Her errand done, they would walk back to meet the rest of the party, and then all go together to see the sunset on a sandy reach that lay two miles on the other side of Llanoun, where the car-

riage had been ordered to meet them. She thus made sure of at least a good half-hour's *tête-à-tête* with Herne, in the course of which she said to herself that she could not fail to bring him to confession.

However, when she found herself alone with him, the task of inquisition seemed less easy than she had judged it while she made her plans. She talked of Laura, and he answered in vague terms about women generally, and their work in life ; she touched on marriage and he was absolutely silent. Then she started the subject of vocations in life, speculating as to what on the whole was the worthiest aim for a man to set before himself in our times, meaning him to understand in her remarks an oblique questioning of his own drifting career. She alluded to Mr. Fenton's theory about women, and said she dis-

sented from it. People ought to have creative power in proportion to their sensibility, and she could only value men and women by what they succeeded in being, not by what they might have been.

‘In short,’ said Herne, ‘you have no place in your philosophy for failures.’

‘No place for them among successes, certainly. But then I don’t think I recognise as many failures as you probably do. I don’t call people failures merely because their particular hobbies go shipwreck. On the whole I think a man’s hobby is generally his mad point, which it is his business in life to get ground down.’

Lady Sarah meant this as a challenge, and she looked up at Herne in expectation of denial. But Herne made no answer.

‘Why don’t you contradict me?’ she

said. ' You know you are full of hobbies and are waiting to begin your life till you find a clear field for them, and that you have a great contempt for people like me who grope along without exactly knowing where they are going to. Why don't you defend the hobby-riders ? '

' Because I am often tempted to feel with you that hobby-riding is a mistake, and to think that the sanest life is the one that is least hampered by abstract principles. Only unfortunately I cannot succeed in getting my mad point ground down. I cannot rest in the conclusion that henceforth man is to be redeemed only piecemeal and by individual efforts, and that the world is never again to experience one of the vivifying movements that make the landmarks of history. To talk in these days of a new gospel is the surest way of

raising a laugh, but yet I can see no inherent absurdity in the idea, unless all past religions have been absurd also.'

'Have you ever stated clearly to yourself what the new gospel should be?' asked Lady Sarah.

'Very clearly once.'

'And now the vision has grown dim?'

'It has.'

'Visions should grow clearer as we advance in life. If they do not, we are justified in counting them among the phantoms that mislead us, not the revelations that guide. Will you tell me what form your vision took?'

'That,' said Herne, 'would be to write its epitaph; and my vision is not quite dead. Within the last few months it has come to me again in almost as vivid form as it had in the beginning. I will still hope to show it to you practically.'

Lady Sarah had for a moment forgotten her part of inquisitor, and in asking Herne for a confession of faith, she had no thought of Laura in her mind. But his answer told her all that she wanted to know: 'the last few months' could only mean 'since I have known Laura,'—the practical demonstration would come after they were married. She said a mental Amen, and then wondered to herself whether she was justified in giving her sympathy to a union of which the happiness must depend on her sister's renunciation of all her past beliefs.

The others came in sight. Laura was walking in front with Mr. Fenton, who was talking continuously as if he were relating a story; and she was listening with the bright sympathy that makes speech so easy. As they met, she said,—

'Mr. Fenton has been telling me such

beautiful stories of the old world, and the last was the most beautiful of all. Do you know the story of the Maid of Craig-y-dōn, Mr. Herne ?'

To take the first opportunity of addressing Herne was a course hardly consistent with the plans with which Laura had come out. But how shall one hinder iron from turning towards the magnet, or look and speech from going where sympathy attracts ?

Herne answered that he did not know the story. Would Laura tell it him ? And he reminded her that she had once promised to tell him a story and never done it. Laura remembered, and said she would pay the debt.

Mr. Fenton's story was one of those primitive allegories in which the human conscience everywhere has expressed its sense of the universal strife between good and evil, by investing surrounding scenery

with moral meanings and transforming the working forces of nature into demons and fairies of the hearth. The fancy of a Gaelic bard had found an image of virgin innocence in a white rock that stood out lonely among the breakers; and, in the sea that tossed and moaned around it, the likeness of a demon lover wooing the white-robed maiden—now with strong embrace of circling waves, now with gentle murmur of caressing ripple—wooing with irresistible persuasion through the long centuries of change that had elapsed since the old dim time when tradition said that the white rock had stood inland a quarter of a lime.

The story in simple outline was familiar to all the fishing population of the neighbourhood, and mothers made a convenient proverb of the bold lass who had left her father's roof to

tempt the waves in company with a strange lover and been requited for her forwardness by abandonment in deep water. In telling the story to Laura, Mr. Fenton had added much to the original legend, developing many latent meanings and analogies, and clothing the whole with quaint imagery and fantastic detail of his own conceiving, so that the allegory was lost sight of; and she had listened with delight as to a true-life story of a world gone by. But when she began to tell it herself to Herne, it struck her with new and embarrassing significance. She hurried to the end, saying as she finished,—

‘After all the beauty must have been in the telling. I do not care for it now. It is too tragic.’

‘Not more tragic than life,’ said Fenton.

‘But it is grim.’

‘So is life,—grim, sad, tragic. The blighted life lays hold on the life that is just budding, and drags it down to perdition. The depths of misery call to the depths of joy, and joy answers the call and is swallowed up by misery. Light goes out in darkness, sweetness of innocence in bitterest remorse. It is the old story of the two powers of Evil and Good contending through the ages, and Evil always victorious.’


‘Oh don’t!’ interrupted Laura; ‘you frighten me.’

‘Forgive me,’ said Fenton; ‘I am a brute. But you see this is an illustration of what I was saying,—any dismal raven that has the fancy to croak can make the angels weep. We must get Mr. Jones to preach us a sermon on the beautiful harmonies of nature in which evil plays the part of an agreeable discord, or dissonance, or diminished something—what is

the right phrase, Lady Sarah? I heard Fräulein Stahl explaining it to you yesterday.'

Lady Sarah had been talking apart to Mr. Burrell Jones. They now joined the other group; and conversation became general. Mr. Jones was eloquent about beauty and art, and said that for his part he did not exactly believe in evil. Lady Sarah said she thought there was a great deal of evil in the world, but that on the whole good was the stronger power. Mrs. Jones agreed with her husband and smiled vaguely at Mr. Fenton's thrusts. Only Herne and Laura were silent; and by-and-by they found themselves walking together a little behind the others.

Laura was absorbed in the thoughts that Fenton's cynical outburst had awakened. This mystery of Good and Evil had been exercising her mind continually of late—seeming as the statement



in large of the personal problem that tormented her ; and her mind continually lost itself in contradictions, while her heart shrank in terror from a chaotic world in which right and wrong were so inseparably mixed that the wisest and strongest disagreed among themselves, and the ignorant knew not to whom to look for guidance. Till lately all her philosophy had been to trust and to believe ; but now she found the instinct of trust and the habit of belief ranged upon opposite sides. The voice that commanded her sympathies spoke words that outraged the traditions in which she had been reared : the suggestions against which it seemed a duty to do unrelenting battle came in tones that were as the echo of a sweet music in herself. And when her perplexity was greatest, the strongest impulse of her being was to turn

for help to the quarter in which her danger lay. Against this impulse she was battling with ebbing force as she walked in silence by Herne's side. Suddenly it mastered her and she said—

‘Do *you* think it is true what Mr. Fenton said just now? Surely it cannot be that good is so weak, and evil so strong, and that the battle between the two always ends in the triumph of evil. It is too terrible to be true.’

‘I think it is so far true that, in the struggle with wrong, right always loses something.’

‘Then,’ said Laura, ‘you agree with Mr. Fenton that wrong is always victorious?’

There was a great sadness in her voice. She had hoped, nay, she had been sure, that Herne would not agree with Fenton; and now she felt that he was passing sentence of despair upon the world.

But Herne had not meant his words to be so taken, and he hastened to explain.

‘No, I do *not* agree to that. What I mean is that wrong can only be cured by much sacrifice of things ideally good. But such sacrifice is not a sacrifice to evil—it is a sacrifice of lesser good now to greater good hereafter. Mr. Fenton thinks it terrible that misery should call to joy, and joy answer to the call. But I cannot sympathise with him. That it should be so, seems to me the only hope for the future. And I daresay Mr. Fenton himself would say so at another time.’

‘I am sure you are right,’ said Laura, speaking with slow gravity—‘that is, if you really mean what I think you do. But then it is not at all what one is generally told is right. It seems to me that all the good that one has, all that makes it possible for one to be better than others, only fills one with remorse

until one has found a way of sharing it with those who have it not. I think, if I had been Lazarus, I would not have rested in Abraham's bosom while Dives was crying to me out of his torment.'

'I am sure you would not—you would have come down from heaven when a voice cried from hell.' And then, for he did not wish to spoil the simplicity of the scene by obtruding suggestions of a personal nature, he added, 'I believe all good women feel as you do—your sister, for instance, who spends all her thought in devising good for the people about her.'

'Yes,' said Laura; 'but then Sarah is clever—all women cannot work as she does.'

'There are other ways than work by which women help the world to grow better. They do it best by being simply good themselves and giving their sympathy to all right effort. Only unfortu-

nately in these days the best men are going one way and the best women are looking another.'

Laura looked up, asking him to speak more plainly. It seemed to her that at last the answer was coming for which she had been so long groping.

'Tell me what you mean,' she said. 'I have thought so often lately how sad it is that people who are earnest-minded and who might work together should have so little sympathy. I cannot call people bad when I know that they are seeking good, and seeking it more earnestly than I am myself. And yet——'

'But yet it seems to you that some people seek good by means that you have been taught to believe lead only to evil.'

'Yes,' she said; 'till sometimes I can see no difference between good and evil, and life seems a mad struggle, with no rest anywhere.'

‘There is no rest in the present,’ said Herne, ‘except for cowards who shirk the struggle.’

He spoke bitterly, and Laura felt rebuked—it did not occur to her that the bitterness was against himself.

‘Oh, it makes me tired to think of it,’ she said, ‘tired to think of this continual battling. Do *you* never feel this? But I know you do not. Cassandra has told me that you have gone bravely forward, facing all the puzzling questions and standing by your convictions whatever they might cost you. And Egmont says the same.’

‘Lady Laura,’ said Herne, ‘you would not say this if you knew me better. I am one of the cowards who have shirked the battle.’

He spoke in a hard, low voice that gave distinctness and significance to every word and made it impossible to

put aside his self-condemnation as a mere convention of speech. He meant what he said, and Laura knew it. He was expressing truly the bitter sense of his failure and unworthiness. He was telling her that the staff on which she had thought to lean was but a reed shaken by the wind. And she had no choice but to believe him. He was weak and astray like herself; there was no help for her in the man for whose sake she had unlearned her trust in God. She could not answer—her disappointment was too deep and terrible to be spoken, and her lips would not shape themselves to words of insincere consolation. For a moment she looked at him with wondering compassion. Then her eyes filled with tears, and she turned them away towards the horizon.

The sun was sinking into the sea and flooding all the scene with a crimson

haze in which objects lost distinctness as though they were dissolving in the glow of deepening colour. The sky seemed close above their heads,—one almost with the sea in which its glory was reflected.

They had walked far out upon the sands and were within a stone's throw of the white rock that rose like a column of opal-tinted mist above the tranquilly-receding tide. The legend came back to Laura's mind, and, with shuddering horror, she felt that the fate of the Maid of Craig-y-dōn was coming upon her. She cast a frightened look backward towards the beach where the rest of the party were lingering; but their figures looked far-off and unreal, she could distinguish no one. She and Herne were alone in the universe—alone and without help.

A great terror filled her mind, prompt-

ing her one moment to fly and the next to turn to Herne for the help he could not give. Suddenly he spoke.

‘I think I see them signing to us from the beach,’ he said. ‘Had we not better go back?’

He spoke in his ordinary voice and seemed quite unconscious of her distress. She tried to turn towards him and answer in a matter-of-course way, but she could not command herself. She was at the extreme point of nervous tension that may break at the most trivial incident or indifferent word, and the sound of his voice was more than she could bear. Her tears could no longer be restrained—she strove to speak, but the effort ended in a sob; and she turned away in helpless confusion. Herne could not pretend unconsciousness any longer. She was crying like a child before him, and he knew why. What could he do

but comfort her? He turned abruptly to her and took her hand; she let him hold it.

‘You are unhappy,’ he said. ‘What is it?’

She did not withdraw her hand, but neither did she answer.

‘Will you not tell me what distresses you?’ he went on. ‘I might be able to help you, and it would be a great happiness to me to do so.’

‘No, no,’ she said, snatching her hand away and speaking almost petulantly. ‘You cannot help me. No one can help me. I am foolish and weak and miserable. And there is no help anywhere. You said so yourself, and I feel that it is true.’

‘I said it? When did I say it? You have misunderstood me. I do not remember saying anything of the kind. When did I say there was no help?’

‘Just now,’ she answered. ‘When I said that you were brave and strong, you answered that you were not, and I felt that you meant it—and—and——’ She broke off and looked imploringly towards him.

‘And was that what distressed you?’ asked Herne, drawing nearer and taking both her hands this time. ‘Is it on my account that you are unhappy?’

‘Oh, I do not know! Only it all seems sad and hopeless to me. And I thought you were strong, and you say you are not. And I do not know what is right. . . . How can I sympathise with right effort, if I do not know what is right?’

She made a feeble effort to withdraw her hands; but as he held them fast, she desisted and looked up at him with an expression in which despair and trust were strangely mingled. It was in vain she repeated that he could not help her

—she felt safe while he held her hands in his, she was almost comforted now that he looked gently on her sorrow.

And he ?

He felt that he had refrained long enough. Cassandra's warning and the sad words in which she had betrayed the long hunger of her life had haunted him hitherto with forbidding power. But the revelation of Laura's dependence on his love had brought a rush of joy that bore down all considerations of prudence or of other claims. If Cassandra loved him, Laura loved him also. If Cassandra needed him, Laura needed him far more. And he needed her. In the knowledge that she loved him he felt a strength that made all things seem possible ; and it was not compassion only for her sadness, or remorse for having caused it, that made him hold her hands more firmly the more she struggled to get

them free. It was a stronger feeling than sympathy that prompted him to say commandingly, 'Listen to me one moment, and then I will let you go.'

She resigned her hands passively to his grasp and looked down in silent expectation of she knew not what. She was so conscious of having behaved foolishly that she would not have been surprised if he had scolded her like a child—she was so willing to be ruled by him that she would not have resented his rebuke. She stood quite still and waited for him to speak.

'Lady Laura,' he said, 'you tell me I cannot help you because I am helpless myself and unworthy and cowardly. It is true that I am all this—at least that I was a moment ago, and should be still if you had not given me back faith in purity and goodness: you said that if you had been Lazarus in heaven you

would not have been happy while Dives cried to you from his torments. You said you would come down to hell if you could make hell better by your presence. Did you mean it?—I want you, Laura. I am asking you to help me to be strong and to do and be all that I once dreamed. Laura, I love you, and I think——’

But at the words ‘I love you,’ she started away from him and stopped him with a look that he interpreted as anger. Till then she had hardly understood what he was saying. His voice was full of passion, and the voice of passion was new to her; it bewildered her like a strange language of which the rhythm stirs without conveying definite ideas. All she had been sure of was that he was not angry with her, and that somehow he was exalting her in the moment of her humiliation. And

she had listened as to a strain of soothing music—not caring to analyse the influence that comforted her. But when he said he loved her, she could not misunderstand any longer. She started back and involuntarily looked up and met his eyes. There was a look of triumph in them from which she recoiled in uncontrollable terror. What was he going to do next? what had she done that he should look at her like that? She had wanted him to love her; but she had not thought that love would look like this.

She turned away and said in a voice that had grown suddenly hoarse, ‘Why do we stay here? It is late and chilly. Let us go back to the others; they must be wondering what has become of us.’

Herne did not end his sentence. Laura was already hurrying back across

the sands ; and he followed her mechanically. As they walked along without speaking, each felt the silence jarringly, though neither could unravel the other's mood. Herne feared that he had offended Laura, and Laura felt herself the prey to a vague dread like that which possesses the mind on awakening from troubled sleep among unfamiliar surroundings.

The group on the beach, who had disappeared for a little while, now came in sight again and made signs to them to hasten. Lady Sarah was looking anxiously at her watch. She had remembered an appointment at home and was afraid she should be too late to keep it. As they walked round to the boat-house where the carriage was to wait they were joined by an old sailor, Owen Williams by name, who as coast-guard-man and captain of the Llanoun

lifeboat was rather an important person in the neighbourhood. He knew all the party except Herne, to whom Lady Sarah introduced him as an old friend of hers. They talked of the weather and Williams prophesied storms. Then he asked Lady Sarah to go in and see his wife, who was in bed, a baby having lately been added to an already numerous family. The carriage not having yet arrived she went in. The gentlemen went round to look at the lifeboat, and they wanted Laura to go too. But she refused—saying she was tired—and sat down on a bench outside the cottage and tried to talk to Mrs. Jones. But she could not attend to her answers; they seemed irrelevant and trivial, as did everything except the words and looks that had just passed between her and Herne. She could take no interest in Lady Sarah's report when she came out of the cottage; and when

Williams came back and tried a second time to persuade her to go round and look at the boat, she stared blankly and seemed to have forgotten that she had ever taken an interest in it.

It was an unspeakable relief when at last the carriage came and she found herself driving home in the twilight.



CHAPTER VI.

‘Wearing an Eden crown.’

LADY MARY reflected a good deal in the course of the afternoon on Laura’s love-affair and Sarah’s very incorrect view of it, with the result that when Laura came in she was lying in wait for her at her bedroom door, meaning to read her a carefully prepared lecture on the subject. That Laura would refuse to listen never entered her head. Nevertheless when she intercepted her in the passage and said, ‘Can you come in here for a few minutes? I particularly want to speak to you before dinner,’—Laura answered

without hesitation that it was impossible, as there was hardly an hour before dinner and she must be quiet for a little while before dressing.

‘I am tired, I want to be alone,’ she said; and she hurried on to her room, leaving her sister in helpless consternation.

Once safe in her own room, she locked the door and threw herself on her knees beside her bed. She was alone at last and might give way to the tempest of emotions with which she had been battling. She bowed her head upon the bed and clasped her hands—falling instinctively into the attitude of prayer, though prayer in any form of articulate words or definite petition was impossible to her. She could only wait passively while wave after wave of emotion went over her; and when at last the tumult subsided and left her calm, she could give no account to herself of the feelings she had had.

They had passed quite away and taken with them all the old self with which she was familiar. The difficulties which had importuned her during the last few months seemed now remote and unimportant. Gone, too, was the wild and sudden terror with which she had started from Herne when he would have spoken on the sands. In its place had come a holier, deeper dread. Her questionings were answered. She knew past doubting that he loved her, and she might frankly face her love for him. The prize after which she had yearned so painfully was hers—but was it in truth the prize she had desired?

He loved her. Yes, but she had thought that would mean that his strong life would take up her weak one and bear it safely above doubt and danger and difficulty—she had thought that, if he loved her, she might become a child again and

come and go at his bidding, heedless of problems because he knew their answer, untroubled by the sin and misery of the world because his life was spent in battling victoriously against them. Oh! she had thought life would be easy if he loved her, and now her spirit fainted under the burden of the dignity with which his love invested her! He loved her: that sounded like rest. But then he worshipped her: that meant that she must labour to be worthy of his worship.

There are humiliations that exalt, and there are honours that humble to the dust. Laura, kneeling at her bedside with her head bowed down upon her hands, felt that a crown had been tendered her which she dare not put aside with any protest of false humility, but which to accept would bring a terrible compulsion to be without fault in all her life. She had heard of girls to

whom their first love came as a bright intoxication, flattering their vanity and making them giddy and self-confident. She thought of them with wonder. For her, it seemed that vanity was dead for ever as she stood upon the threshold of the unknown life and waited with lowly heart for the teaching of revelations yet to come. Life henceforth would be a solemn service; and this, her hour of vocation, she counted high and holy as that in which the virgin of the Christian story was called to glorious destiny. To her, who was but yesterday an irresponsible child, whose safety lay in doubt of self and humble reliance upon the judgment of others, had been given the woman's crown and sceptre—to her who, stumbling in the dark, had stretched her hand to grasp that of another whom she believed able for guidance, had come a confession of that other's weakness—

to her who deemed herself helpless had gone forth an appeal for help. She was bidden to the place of royalty, but she could take her queendom only on her knees—yielding herself as to a holy fate to which she had been born and which therefore she had no option to refuse.

She was roused from her kneeling posture by her maid knocking at the door. She was tempted to send her away and say she could do without help this evening; but, reflecting that this course would certainly provoke comment in the household, she let her in and resigned herself to be dressed as usual. Only when it was suggested to her to put on a rather grand new gown, she declined it, and asked for a plain white one that she had had a long time. In the change of all within her, she felt that the familiar garment would be a helpful link of con-

tinuity between the old Laura and the new.

She delayed going down to the drawing-room till she could count on all the party being assembled. Otherwise she might have encountered Lady Mary and been forced to hear things that would have jarred upon her mood. To-morrow, she thought, she would confide in Sarah, but for the present she chose to be silent: it would be time for speech when she had sounded all the depths of her new experience. Besides it would be necessary to sit through dinner; and how could she do this if her secret were known to others at the table? Her heart beat fast as she entered the drawing-room, and things swam dizzily before her eyes. Among all the figures scattered about the room only one was clear to her, and from that one she turned her eyes away.

‘You are late, Laura,’ said Lady Sarah ;
‘we are all waiting for you.’

‘I hope you are rested,’ said Lady Mary with significant emphasis on the words, which however was wasted upon Laura. She neither spoke nor smiled, but stood still in her white gown—looking serene and radiant—till Mr. Fenton came up to her and said,—

‘I believe I am to have the pleasure of taking you in to dinner to-night.’

Dinner proved a less terrible ordeal than she had expected. Herne was at the other end of the table, on the same side of the room as herself, so that there was no danger of their eyes meeting or of her being led into conversation with him ; and Mr. Fenton talked kindly to her and was patient when she answered absently. After dinner she took refuge in a corner with the children, and when the gentlemen came in, Fenton joined

her again. She was playing with a string of opals that she had unfastened from her neck to show to the children.

‘They are like the colours of the rainbow,’ said little Rachel.

‘And like my prism,’ put in Eustace.

‘But you should not wear opals, Lady Laura,’ remonstrated Mr. Fenton; ‘they are unlucky. Will you let me look at them nearer?’

Laura handed them to him. ‘They are very beautiful stones,’ he said; ‘but you ought not to wear them. They are treacherous and inconstant, and your part is constancy.’

‘Are you superstitious?’

‘Not more than most people. We are all like the children and animals, more impressed by the appearance of things than by their reality. Practically, I suppose no man can have a more thorough distrust of appearances than I

have ; but that does not hinder my moods from being influenced by them. I have been distressed all dinner-time by seeing you dressed in opals.'

'I am not afraid of them,' said Laura, taking back her necklace and fastening it round her throat again.

Lucky or unlucky, it was a most becoming ornament to her. The simple circle of beads lightly clasped her throat and set off its round fulness very beautifully ; while the changing colours of the stones seemed to be reflected in the fitful bloom of her complexion and the clear blue veining of her forehead. The great transparency of her skin gave at all times an ethereal character to her beauty, and to-night this effect was much heightened by the strain of inward emotion that swayed her like an exquisite music. She spoke, smiled, listened, moved, with the air of one who

is far-off in mind ; and yet she could not be called absent, for she missed nothing that was said to her, and her answers were prompt and to the point. It seemed rather that all her senses were quickened and their powers multiplied so that she could move sanely in two worlds at once—her feet on earth, her crown in heaven. Mr. Fenton had known her ever since she was a child, but he thought he had never seen her look so beautiful before.

‘ I think if you had not said they were so unlucky I should have had to give you my opals, Mr. Fenton—you cannot take your eyes off them.’

‘ They are worshipping eyes, not covetous ones, I assure you,’ answered Fenton, taking the hint and withdrawing the admiring look that was embarrassing her. And then, sitting down beside her, he said,—

‘Opals have always had a fascination for me. They seem to me the type of a sensitive nature, and it is in this sense, I suppose, that we feel them to be of evil omen. I once made them the motive of a picture, which, however, came to nothing. It was intended to be one of a series, but the idea broke down.’

‘Why did it break down?’

‘For the usual reason,—it grew too tragic in its development.’

‘Will you tell me about it?’ said Laura.

‘If you like. But you will soon tell me to stop, as you did this afternoon. I had a fancy that the gems we most admire are all typical of different phases of human passion, and I thought I would paint the story of a woman’s life in a series of pictures, each of which should represent a different stage in the development or decline of her affections. In the first I painted a very young girl

ornamented with pure, colourless crystals ; in the second I dressed her in opals ; in the third I gave her pearls for young matronhood ; in the fourth, rubies for the pain of ripe life when passion is strong and fierce ; and in the fifth and last I decked her with diamonds, because when innocence and repose and passion are alike past, a woman depends on the splendour of her intellect and the brilliancy of her wit. Now you will give me a lecture, for I know you agree with me that wit is a poor thing to end with.'

'Yes ; but I can see the truth of your idea, only——'

'What were you going to say ?'

'That I think there are different kinds of love, and that it is not the best kind of love that you were painting.'

Fenton said abruptly, 'You are very happy to-night.'

'Very,' said Laura simply.

‘And you thought me a brute this afternoon?’

‘You made me unhappy for a little while. But it is past—only I wish——’ She stopped, and her eyes filled with tears.

‘Why should you stop? People should speak when they are happy—it is the moment of inspiration? What do you wish?’

‘That everybody was happy,’ said Laura with a sigh.

Fenton smiled and walked away to fetch some engravings he had promised to show her, and when he came back they talked of great masters and their works. Later in the evening Fräulein Stahl played on the piano; and then bedtime came, and Laura saw Herne coming towards her to say good-night.

She looked up as he approached her, and met his look with grave, unsmiling simplicity. It was the same look from which she had fled in panic a few hours

ago—the look that seemed to take possession of her life and bind it with sweet and terrible conditions. But it did not startle her this time; rather, the mysterious tension of her mood seemed to gather strength from it. She held out her hand and said good-night.

‘Good-night, Lady Laura,’ answered Herne. And the words rang full and solemn on her ear like the opening passage of a great poem of human thought and passion and prayer.

As the ladies went together through the long passages that led to the bedrooms, they paused several times to remark on the violence of the wind that rushed down the chimneys and shook the hangings of the old house, and on the storm-clouds drifting wildly across the sky. Lady Sarah reminded Laura of Williams’ predictions, and Laura answered mechanically. She hardly knew that the

wind was raging, and she had not noticed the cloud-confusion of the heavens. And when her sister wished her good-night at her bedroom door and stood a moment divided between a loving solicitude that prompted her to ask for confidence and a not less loving reverence that restrained her from intruding into the closed sanctuary, she looked in her dreamy joy so sweet and saintlike that Lady Sarah inwardly vowed that this marriage should not fail if effort of hers could bring it to an issue. So true is it that the best instrument of conversion is the beatitude of the apostles.

‘Good-night, dear,’ she said tenderly; ‘if the storm comes on and you are frightened, you must call me.’

Laura promised, and thanked her sister for the kind thought; but she felt the while that no storm of the elements could upset her peace.



CHAPTER VII.

‘Life treads on life, and heart on heart ;
We press too close in church and mart
To keep a dream or grave apart.’

LAURA lay down to rest with a deeper sense of peace than she had yet known in the course of her short, bright life ; and if any one had asked her whether there was in her heart any unsatisfied desire, any craving for fruition or sense of greater joy before her to which her present content was but the prelude, she would have answered truly, *No*. She wanted no change in her outward life ; she did not trouble herself to wonder whether

Herne would speak again before he went back to London, or whether her family would allow her to become his wife. She was happy, too happy to think or wish—or if she had any wish at all it was that every hour of her life might overflow as this one did with the bliss of knowing that she might love. And so she fell asleep, resting on the bosom of her great content with as little consciousness of what lay below it as the sea-bird alighting on the crest of a wave has of the terrors of the deep.

And while she slept the wind moaned outside, and shook the house to its foundations, and wrestled with the great trees in the park and tore off their branches and flung them in confusion on the ground, and scared the hearts of sailors' wives in the village, and drove many a ship upon a fatal rock. The wind raged, and the clouds drifted in black masses

through the starless sky to meet in vivid lightnings and awful crashing thunder.

One does not look for thunder-storms in winter ; and Laura, starting from her sleep to feel the house trembling and see lightning flashing from the mirrors, was seized with a great terror in which all the emotions of the preceding day mingled in wild confusion like fragments of a noble edifice that a sudden shock has tumbled into ruins. It was the culminating moment of the storm, and when the last reverberation of the peal that had awakened her had died away, a long pause followed in which no flash relieved the darkness, and the only sound to be heard was the moaning of the wind. She sat up in bed with clasped hands and tried to be brave ; but in vain. All the stories she had ever heard of the havoc wrought by wind and sea came rushing through her mind as in a cataract

of horror, and, mingled with them, came floating before her vision scenes of the past months.

Suddenly with an unutterable sense of relief she heard Sarah's voice outside her door: she was giving orders to a servant to have things in readiness as if for travellers expected in the night. Laura glided out of bed and joined her in the passage.

'Is anything the matter?' she asked with chattering teeth.

'There is a ship in distress,' answered Lady Sarah, 'and they have all gone out to help. It is an awful storm!'

'They—who?'

'Edward and all the men in the house. I think Egmont and Maurice Herne meant to volunteer for the life-boat. I was giving orders to have hot things ready for them when they come in.'

Lady Sarah spoke composedly as if

she were not anxious about them beyond fearing colds and rheumatism from exposure to the storm. Laura tried to feel equally calm, but she could not. She had turned deadly white on hearing that Herne was probably out in the lifeboat: she leaned against the doorpost and clasped her hands tightly together. Lady Sarah noticed her whiteness.

‘Poor child,’ she said, ‘how cold you are! I thought you were sleeping soundly. Indeed you were an hour ago, for I looked in and saw you.’ And she led her back into her room and covered her up with blankets.

‘What will they do?’ asked Laura. She wanted to know particulars of what they might be doing on the waves. But she had no experience of nautical matters and did not know exactly how to shape her questions. Lady Sarah was standing by the window absorbed in her

own thoughts and did not hear the question.

Laura watched her with wonder. There was something very impressive to her in the calm manner in which she spoke and moved—something almost as awful in a different way as the raging of the storm outside :—more awful, perhaps, from the contrast it offered to the terror of her own heart. That seemed at least in sympathy with her mood ; but this stoicism which a stranger might almost have mistaken for hardness seemed to stand apart from the storm and to tower above its terrors. She felt rebuked and oppressed by it.

‘Are you not terribly anxious about them?’ she asked. ‘It is awful to think of people one cares for being in such danger.’

‘It is very awful,’ replied Lady Sarah. ‘One can only feel that all is in God’s

hands. At times like this it always seems to me that there comes a pause in life when the ordinary course of thought and feeling is broken across, and the only wisdom is to follow the old word that tells us to "stand still and wait upon the Lord."'

Laura could not answer. She felt that there was a gulf between her and her sister. Sarah could be calm because she trusted in a Power above the storm, while her own courage was dead and her peace shattered because she had unlearned the trust of her childhood, and the new light had as yet been too faintly revealed to help her in the hour of difficulty. Later, when her anxiety was over, she knelt down and thanked the Power in which her sister trusted: but she remembered all her life that while the danger lasted all her prayer was a suppressed repetition of the name that had lately

grown so dear to her. She remembered that though Sarah had said that Egmont was in the boat as well as Maurice Herne, she hardly thought of him at all. Like the Maid of Craig-y-dōn, she had left her own people to follow a stranger, and her punishment was coming—she would be left alone in deep waters to stretch out her arm vainly for a vanished help.

Her sister sat with her for about half-an-hour, and then, the storm being well over, she wished her good-night and left her, promising to come back as soon as she had any tidings to impart. ‘You are quite sure you do not mind being left alone?’ she said.

‘Quite sure,’ answered Laura. ‘The storm is over and there is nothing more to fear.’

‘Because if you mind in the least, I will stay.’

‘No, no,’ said Laura. She was im-

patient now for Sarah to be gone—she could not endure much longer the reproach that she had come to feel in her presence. But when she was really alone solitude grew horrible again, and unable to lie still in bed, she rose and went to the window to look out upon the night. She knelt down and rested her arms upon the window-sill and strained her eyes to see through the darkness in the direction where the danger lay. But she could see nothing, and the horror of her loneliness increased, till at last the cry of her heart became articulate and she moaned aloud, ‘Oh, Maurice, Maurice!’

Then her head sank upon her hands, and the long-pent tears flowed in the darkness.

She did not know how long she remained so; but when she looked up again the clouds were breaking and a few stars shone faintly through the

gloom. She felt calmer—the tears had relieved the overstrain of her nerves, and a dull quiet had fallen on her senses. She had ceased to feel, but she had not yet energy to think—she could only keep still, and let what fancies would float before her mind's vision. Weird, terrible fancies they were, but she looked on at them unmoved.

The night was peopled with strange faces—grinning, horrible, grotesque; in turn they beckoned her with unearthly gestures, and then when she looked at them with closer attention, one face after another became like Maurice and looked at her through the darkness as he had looked upon the sands—only the face was white and haggard as with long suffering, and sad with an infinite and hopeless yearning; and all the others seemed to say, 'There is a great gulf fixed.' . . . Then Maurice was dead and his soul had

passed into the unknown world—into far regions of which she knew nothing, whither she could never follow. He was outcast by God because of his unbelief; he was alone and sorrowful, yearning for a word of sympathy or a look of love, and a great gulf of silence divided her from him. She had let him go without telling him she loved him, and now it was too late. She might cry out, but he would not hear; she might stretch her hand out into the darkness, but it could not reach his hand; her heart might break to beat against his, but he would never know it through all the ages of eternity. . . . Then the vision changed again, and it was she who was outcast and miserable. He had died nobly, sacrificing his life for others, and his spirit had found rest. But she could not join him, for her faith was not like his, and she was not worthy. He was happy among souls that knew his

excellence—happy without her. And Laura, alone with her own soul in the darkness, knew that this vision was worse than the one that had preceded it. ‘O God!’ she murmured to herself, ‘annihilation would be more bearable,—for him now, and by-and-by for me.’ ‘Annihilation’ she repeated over and over to herself. The word had till now been of utmost horror for her, but in comparison with other possibilities she began to discover comfort in it. She rose from her knees and walked up and down the room, trying to get rid of the numbness that possessed her, and to realise that body and soul were still one and alive. Then she came back to the window. The clouds were more scattered and the stars were getting brighter. One star struck her as more brilliant than the others. She fixed her eyes upon it. It was Maurice’s spirit—far away, unattain-

able, but still visible. She kept it in view ; every now and then a cloud passed over it and hid it for a moment, then it emerged again. The clear space in the sky was growing larger, but there were still ominous masses of cloud towards the west where the storm had been heaviest, and they were moving slowly in the direction of the clear space. Would they swallow up her star and engulf it once more in blackness ? They were very near ; her heart beat nervously,—the foolish superstition had taken hold of her imagination. If the star was hidden Maurice would be lost. She held her breath while she watched.

But while there was still a space like a handbreadth between the star and the edge of the advancing clouds, her attention was recalled from fancy to fact. Footsteps were coming towards the house, and, with the steps, a hum of voices.

She opened her window noiselessly and leaned out, trying to distinguish faces and figures. But all she could see was a confused group, and the voices were subdued so that it was impossible to tell what was said or who was speaking.

She heard the house-door open and close again. Then all was still. She put on a dressing-gown, crept to the door and waited, thinking surely Sarah would come soon and tell her how things had gone.

Some one was coming upstairs. She recognised Egmont's step and went out to meet him. He was hurrying along the passage and he did not see her—he was brushing by her in the darkness. But her suspense was not to be borne a moment longer. 'Egmont,' she said, 'tell me, are you safe?'

Egmont started. 'Good Heavens, Laura! is it you? Yes, thank God, I am safe; but it has been an awful night.

Where is Sarah ? ' And without waiting for an answer he hurried on in the direction of Sarah's room. But when he had gone a few paces he turned back, and seeing Laura still standing in the passage straining to catch sounds from the hall, he said, ' You had better go back to your room, Laura. I will come to you as soon as possible ; but I cannot come now. Whatever you do, don't go down.'

Laura had not thought of going down ; but now the earnestness with which her brother begged her not to do so, revived all her fears with exaggerated intensity. Why should he be in such a hurry to find Sarah, why so determined that she should not go down ? It could only have one meaning, too horrible to be put into words. She would not be kept out of the way, she who had a better right to be present than any one. She flew along the passage and down the stairs,

not pausing till she was in the hall. There she stopped suddenly, bewildered by the glare of light and confusedly conscious of a number of people crowding together round something at the far end of the hall. She tried to take in the scene, glancing hurriedly from one face to another. She saw her brother-in-law talking gravely to Mr. Burrell Jones, who looked haggard and unlike himself. Mr. Fenton was there, and all the men-servants, and one or two other figures that were unknown to her. But the one face that she was seeking was not there. All at once she realised that the something round which they were gathered was the body of a man. She felt a sudden sickness and a pang at her heart like a sharp physical pain, and, clutching at the banister, she bent down and gave a low moan.

‘I do not think you ought to be here,’

said a voice close beside her, at sound of which she gave a cry of joy and started forward with outstretched hands:—

‘It was not you then,—oh, thank God!’

Herne took her hands tenderly and held them for one moment’s space, during which their eyes met in a mutual claiming look. Then he put them reverently aside: this was no moment for lover’s speech. ‘Hush—sh,’ he said, motioning her back with a mixture of respect and authority in his manner. ‘I think you must not come further. You are faint, let me help you upstairs. There is a poor fellow dying there. We have done what we could for him, but I fear there is no hope of bringing him round.’

‘Dying—who is dying?’ asked Laura.

‘It is Williams—the man we talked to this afternoon. He behaved like a hero at the wreck. But it was in coming

back that it happened. We got into the current, and the boat was carried on to the reef by the landing-place, and it was smashed. We were close in, and he got crushed against a rock. He was terribly injured. I fear there is no doubt he is dying.'

'Dying !' she repeated with an accent of horror on the word. She had lived eighteen years in the world and had not yet seen any one die—no gap had opened in the circle of her loved ones. No one near or dear to her had yet passed out of the living world. Death was for her a word, a spectre—a far-off, unreal terror. She had fancied indeed just now while she was alone in the dark, going through in imagination all the misery involved in the loss that seemed to threaten her, that she had met death face to face and grappled with its utmost horrors. But now she realised how far

fact surpasses the most lively imagining. She had thought of death as striking the life that was dearest to her, and she had said to herself with shame that, that life spared, no other blow could touch her—that father, mother, brothers, sisters, all had grown indifferent to her in comparison with the new absorbing love. And now Herne told her that Owen Williams was dying, and in a moment all personal feelings sank abashed in the presence of a sorrow that had fallen on a household hardly known to her. ‘Dying!’ she repeated. ‘But is it certain we can do nothing? We are so many. . . . Oh surely, there must be help. Where is Sarah?’

Sarah was coming down the staircase with Egmont, too much occupied with the thought of the dying man to be surprised at seeing Laura. She gave a questioning look to Herne, who answered

low, 'I fear it is all over,' and then went on towards the place where Williams was lying.

'Let me come with you?' said Laura, and Sarah let her take her hand and accompany her. She knew she could do no good, but a feeling like remorse hindered her from going back to her room. While others had been helping, suffering, dying, she had been wholly occupied with her own morbid imaginings, and now, as she looked on the face of the dead man, it seemed to upbraid her with selfishness, and her own words of thankfulness, uttered on hearing that it was not Herne, came back upon her mind with a meaning akin to murder. The doctor let fall the dead hand, and said in a low distinct voice that sounded all over the hall,—

'It is all over. There has been no respiration for several seconds. There

is nothing more to be done, Lady Sarah.'

And then the silence in which they had been standing for several minutes was exchanged for a general murmur of subdued conversation about what should be done with the body and how the sad intelligence should be carried to the widow.

'It is all over,' Laura repeated to herself, 'and there is nothing more to be done.' And she went near and looked long and steadily upon the face of the dead man. She was by nature timid, and yesterday she would have shrunk from the sight of death. But she felt that it belonged to her new part in life to shrink from no facts of existence; she must not any longer be a child, but a brave and helpful woman, familiar with the trouble and sadness of the world. Besides it seemed cowardly to shrink from

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the poor dead body to which, but a few hours ago, so many weak ones had looked for help—cruel to turn away and leave it alone with death.

Oh surely it is not a wholly morbid feeling that makes us linger sometimes in the presence of the calamity we cannot undo, and the hours are not wasted during which we wait silently looking in the face of the inexorable power from which all our yearning can win nothing back! Surely if it is well to admire the might of man and to grasp the fulness of his knowledge, it is well also to have felt his helplessness and to have bowed in humbleness before the veil that hides the infinite mystery his science cannot penetrate—accustoming our hearts to patience and our intellects to the high wisdom of knowing that there is a limit beyond which they cannot go. And perhaps it is doubly well for the

prosperous, whose day of sorrow is so long deferred that Fate seems to have forgotten them, to look betimes beyond the charmed circle of their individual lot and learn the look of sorrow and touch the hand of death, so that when their day comes at last they may know how to submit, and in the meantime it may not be said of them,—‘They are so happy that they cannot understand the sorrows of their brothers.’

Not that Laura argued thus as she drew near to the dead body from which others were drifting away, intent on talk about necessary details of arrangement. She merely followed an instinct of sympathy and the promptings of that unreasonable self-reproach we all feel in the presence of a catastrophe that has fallen upon another while our thoughts have been self-absorbed.

At last Egmont called her away.

‘You must not stay here any longer,’ he said, kindly; and he took her up to her room and made her promise to go back to bed. And an hour later, as she lay with sleepless eyes fixed on the dark window, watching wearily for the late winter dawn, she heard him open her door gently and look in.

‘Egmont!’ she called, and he came to her bedside and knelt down beside her and put his arm round her neck; and then she cried upon his shoulder and clung to him, begging him not to leave her till it was light. ‘It has all been so terrible,’ she said; ‘and I cannot get it out of my mind.’

So he sat with her till morning, telling her about the shipwreck and the danger they had run in the lifeboat. And as they talked over the horrors of the night, saying simply the first thing that came into their heads, each sure

of the sympathy of the other, Laura felt that the old childish days had come back again when she and Egmont were all in all to one another; and she wondered more and more that she could have dreamed for a moment that any new experience could blot out the old ones, or a new love be to her instead of the tried affections that had so grown with her growth that her very being seemed made up of them.



CHAPTER VIII.

‘ Calling him lord.’

HERNE had gone back to London before Laura appeared next morning. And Lady Sarah gave her a message of good-bye from him, adding to it the information that he would come back for one day and night towards the end of the week as arrangements were being made for a public funeral for Williams in which all the village would take part—those who had rowed with him in the boat acting as pall-bearers in accordance with the custom of Llanoun.

The respite thus gained was very

welcome to Laura : she hoped that before Herne's return she might have recovered in some measure the calm that had come to her in the hour when she knelt by her bedside and meekly took her crown of womanhood. That hour seemed now very far away and its peace fled for ever. And like one who, after partaking in a solemn rite in which his soul has risen above all weakness of body and worldliness of mind to commune face to face with the Spirit of Eternal Good, finds on returning to the busy street that his exalted mood is no safeguard against the distractions of the world, and is tempted to call in question the teaching of the sacramental hour, so she doubted now the reality of the inspiration that had seemed so strong and proved so weak. For a brief space her spirit had touched the Highest and she had thought that henceforth all life would be illumined

by the sacred flame kindled in the contact. But, as the intolerable glory faded quickly from the face of Moses, and the divinely-graven tablets were shattered in wrath at sight of the perverse nation revelling around a golden calf, so her light had gone out and the new law of a consecrating love that had seemed given to guide her steps aright had fallen into meaningless confusion. The doubts that had been put to flight by the declaration of Herne's love had now returned, and her high sense of the obligation to be faultless that his love imposed, seemed to increase their urgency without making her more fit to deal with them. The thought of Cassandra's claims came back now with torturing importunity, while in her doubts as to the rightness of joining herself to one who denied the faith to which she had been bred she found another difficulty in

which she could get no help from any one : she felt that it was a question for her own conscience only.

It was matter of thankfulness with her that during her days of respite she was left very much to herself. Lady Sarah was continually occupied, and, of the guests who had been staying in the house, the greater number went away on the day after the storm. The Courtenays returned home, the Walworths and Lady Mary Vane went on to Ard-gwen, and Fräulein Stahl, thinking that Lady Sarah would probably be glad to have as few people staying in the house as possible, considerably invented an engagement in London. Only the Burrell Joneses and Mr. Fenton remained, besides herself and Egmont. Mr. Jones was to take part in the funeral service and Fenton of course could not be spared.

Once or twice Laura thought of going home before the day on which Herne was to come back, but to do this would have involved an explanation with her sister, a course towards which she felt a growing disinclination. So she stayed, and when Herne came back to Llanoun on the day before the funeral, she was still there; and when the afternoon and evening went by without his saying or looking anything that showed remembrance of her unguarded words on the night of the wreck, she began to think that perhaps after all he had not noticed them and that he would return finally to London without seeking further speech with her. She said to herself that it would be over now in a few hours. And as they all walked to the church together next morning she felt that the burial to which she was going, was that of all the sweetest promises that life had yet spoken to her.

It was in a solemn silence of close-pressed lips and tightened hearts that the population of Llanoun walked in black procession behind the coffin that bore Owen Williams to his resting-place in the little graveyard by the sea. Men, women, and children were there, rich and poor knit together for one short hour less by a common sorrow than by a common sense of prostration before a power greater than man. Differently, each from each, they felt the occasion of their gathering—the loss of father, husband, friend, old neighbour, new acquaintance; but all had a common note in the mute amazement of soul that comes in the presence of a calamity not referable to human responsibility.

Laura's thoughts wandered a good deal during the service, and when she called them back to attention she was painfully conscious of dissent. She could not but

remember the passionate rebellion of her spirit when it had seemed that the threat of the tempest was aimed at her own heart; and, rebelling for others now as she had rebelled then for herself, she felt towards the bereaved family and all the mourners and sufferers of the world a sudden outleap of sympathy that had something of the indignant colour that our compassion takes when it is enlisted on behalf of an oppressed people. The universe seemed to confront her in a new aspect: she saw men struggling together in close-ranked brotherhood against a strong, unpitying Fate of which the instruments were storm and disease and pestilence and death. She could not join in prayer or praise, for prayer and praise were alike addressed to him whose hand was said to arm the tempest and to spread the pestilence. God appeared to her as a Destroyer, and her sympathies

were with the victims. She tried to listen to the sermon and to find comfort in the reiteration of the stock phrases by which optimist theology justifies the ways of a God all-loving and all-mighty to the doubting hearts of those whom he has stricken. But in vain. The arguments of the preacher carried no conviction—his exhortations left her cold. She remembered how she had once reproached Herne for wishing to take their last comfort from the miserable—she thought now that their comfort was no comfort. She began to understand how for all whose worship has its centre outside the human world, the lessons of such hours must needs be dark, and how only those who have learned to recognise the moral blindness of the universe, and whose help is in the loyal hand-grasp of their brothers, can find their religious trust quickened and its bonds strength-

ened by the calamity that man has not contrived. And she yearned towards those whose trust is in a Providence that does not claim to be almighty. She thought there would be consolation in belonging to a communion of which the bond was a sense of mutual dependence, and to whom every blow of Fate would come but as a signal for the rallying of comrades—an occasion for extending the human sympathy that is the sole support of stricken man.

When the sermon ended and the congregation bowed their heads in reverence, Laura drew hers up in involuntary protest, and as she did so her eyes met Herne's, and she knew that he was feeling with her.

A few hours later she was sitting in the window-sill of her favourite little room, looking sadly out upon the park, where the boughs torn off by the storm still

lay scattered in disorder. She was very pale, and there were large dark circles under her eyes, and every now and then her lips quivered and her brow contracted as though she were struggling to command some painful thought. She was saying to herself for the hundredth time that Herne would go back to London without speaking to her further, and that it was well that he should do so—he was bound to Cassandra, as she had always thought, and his feeling for her had been a passing movement of unfaithfulness for which she was herself probably to blame. He would go away and forget her, and right would be done, and by-and-by she would be strong enough to be glad.

If only he would go without bidding her good-bye, and so spare her the pain of another interview! It seemed to her that she could not meet him again and look in his face and touch his hand and

hear him say her name—and not break out in some wild way. She might have been to blame, but surely *all* had not been her fault or her imagining. It was not her fancy that he had said he loved her that evening on the sands. And why should he say it if he did not mean it? Surely it had not been all her fault, and, if she had betrayed herself that night, he at least must know that she was not without excuse.

She could give him up; she wished him to go back to Cassandra and be faithful, but she could not find it in her heart to believe that he had not cared for her a little. To think that, seemed somehow to rob her of existence.

But Herne had not forgotten, and while Laura was praying that he would go away without seeing her again he was seeking her about the house. He had turned back from a walk on which

he had started with Egmont and Mr. Fenton, making the excuse that he had some papers which he must look through before going back to town; he had sought Laura in the dining-room and in the library, and now he was coming along the passage through which we once saw her flying from Lady Mary's admonitions.

Laura heard his footstep and started from her seat, her pale face growing suddenly crimson. But before he could enter she had turned deadly white again and was standing with her face towards the window. She did not turn round as he came in, but waited as she was for him to speak.

‘Lady Laura,’ he said, ‘I have come to say good-bye to you. I am obliged to go back to London this afternoon.’

‘Yes,’ said Laura, without lifting her eyes from the ground.

‘And I had something else to say besides good-bye,’ said Herne; and then he paused, hoping that she would look up and give him some encouragement. But Laura was motionless and her eyes were still cast down.

‘I had a great many things to say to you,’ continued Herne,—‘things which I tried to say to you once before. You stopped me then, but you have seemed since to give me leave to think that you would care to hear them. May I say them now?’

Still Laura did not speak, and he went on. ‘To tell you that I love you as I have never loved any woman before would be a very small part of what I had to say. I wanted to tell you that I worship you as the purest and noblest being that I have ever known—I wanted to thank you for having taught me to believe again in the possibility of life

being grand and pure and beautiful. I wanted to tell you all this.'

Her back was still turned towards him. He tried to take her hand, and she withdrew it.

'Why do you turn away from me?' he said.

'Leave me,' moaned Laura.

But he only drew nearer. She was trembling visibly.

'Why should you tremble before me?' he said. 'Laura—dearest—look up and tell me that I may speak. Will you not tell me that what you seemed to say the other night was true—that you do care for me and that my love is not an offence to you?'

But Laura stood as if spell-bound. With exquisite delight she had heard him call her simply by her name, as if she were his and there were no more division between them. But stronger than de-

light was her sense that he was tempting her to a great wrong. The image of Cassandra rose between them, and she felt herself a traitor to her friend. Speech seemed impossible, and yet she must speak. She looked up and met his gaze steadily for a minute ; then turning away again, she stammered, ' Cassandra.'

The name alone uttered at that moment had reminder enough in it to move Herne disagreeably : the look that accompanied it made it impossible for him to doubt the meaning with which it was spoken. He understood that Laura believed him to be virtually engaged to her cousin, and he concluded hastily that Cassandra herself was answerable for the belief. A moment ago he too had felt compunction towards Cassandra, but now compunction gave place to resentment.

‘Cassandra!’ he echoed. ‘What has Cassandra to do with us?’

‘Oh everything!’ said Laura; ‘she is the dearest friend I have, and—but you know.’

‘What do I know?’ asked Herne.

‘You know—at least I mean—I thought—we all thought you were going to marry Cassandra.’

‘There is some mistake,’ said Herne angrily. ‘Who has told you that I was going to marry Cassandra? It is a dream, an invention. Cassandra and I are each free as far as the other is concerned. We are good friends—that is all: at least we were before I heard this.’

‘Oh, what have I done?’ cried Laura in distress. ‘It was my own fancy—Cassandra never told me anything—I thought it for myself—we all thought it. Is it possible that we were all mistaken?’

‘You were very much mistaken,’ said Herne. ‘There is nothing between me and Cassandra. She is free and I am free. Do you believe me?’

‘Yes, I believe you,’ said Laura. ‘Only it seems strange when I had been thinking it all along.’

‘But you believe me? And now you will let me speak?’

He spoke confidently as if victory were already won. But Laura drew back and said,—

‘Oh no, I have listened too long already. I do not know what has happened to me. Please do not say anything more. You are kind sometimes. Be kind now and leave me.’

‘No,’ said Herne, ‘I cannot leave you. Not at least till you have answered me whether you love me or not. I have a right to ask that question. You gave me the right on the night of the storm,

and you must not send me away without an answer.' He waited a moment, but as she did not speak he went on, dropping the tone of fierce determination in which he had begun to one of quiet argument. 'Lady Laura,' he said, 'when we stood together this morning in the churchyard, it passed through my mind that in all calamities like death and ruin that come from the great forces of the world over which man has no control, there is this element of good, that they strip life for the moment of all artificialities and make us feel the true worth and sacredness of natural human feeling. I had loved you almost from the first moment of our meeting, but till this morning I never deliberately purposed to ask you to be my wife. I said you belonged to another world than mine, and that it was my duty to leave you where you were happy. But this morn-

ing I took courage and said that my love—our love—was a more sacred thing than the barriers that the customs of the world have built up between us. I said to myself that if you cared for me as you had given me reason to think you did, you would be happier in following the impulse of your heart and becoming my wife than in stifling your love for the sake of rank and wealth. I said that I had a right to ask you from yourself, and that they were wrong who warned me in the name of your happiness to leave you. Was I right, Laura—my love?—tell me that I was right!’

He had done speaking, and was standing over her waiting once more for her to speak, and she had sunk into the window-sill and hidden her face in her hands. She dared not meet his eyes, for she knew what power was in them to subdue her weakness. She did not an-

swer at once. She was trying to reason with his arguments—trying to meet him on the ground that he had taken. But the ground was new to her. She had never thought of the difference in their worldly position as a barrier between them. Barrier enough had been found in the thought of Cassandra's prior love and the romance of engagement between the cousins that her imagination had built up,—mountains of separation that made it superfluous to inquire whether there were also molehills in the way. But now the mountains were removed by a word. And yet she shrank from him, almost wishing that she could find valid ground for the denial of his suit in the difference of rank to which he had referred; for she feared that the scruples that held her back, though they were real to her with a reality far beyond any that belonged to the facts of

mundane life, would seem to him mere cobwebs spun by her girlish fancy to be brushed away by a stroke of masculine common-sense.

‘Was I right, dearest?’ he repeated in a lower tone, of which she felt the pleading force thrilling through every fibre of her body and compelling her to speak though she would fain have prolonged for ever the respite silence gave her.

‘You were right,’ she said, speaking very low as if she would avoid hearing the sound of her own words,—‘you were right. What has happened during the last few days has been so terrible and so solemn that we cannot help speaking the truth to one another. After that night it would be useless for me to pretend that I do not care for you. I will not try. I think I do not dare. You know that I care for you . . . But then there is much more that you do not know—there is——

She paused. It seemed to her that he might laugh if she told him what was in her mind, and she could not bear that.

‘What is there?’ said Herne; ‘what can there be to keep us apart if you do love me as you say you do?’

‘Oh there is much, very much. There is a gulf between us,’ said Laura, despairingly.

‘I knew the world would say so,’ answered Herne with a note of bitterness in his voice that made her wince. ‘I knew the world would say that I had no right to ask you to marry me. But I did not think that *you* would say so. I thought it was you who said that you would be miserable in the possession of any good that you could not share with others. Was it all a dream, what you told me that evening on the sands when you seemed like an angel from heaven come to rebuke my doubt in goodness

and to cheer me with sympathy in all the best feelings of my life? Was it a dream, and are you now angry with me because I have asked you to be my wife?’

‘Oh no, no!’ she said, unable to endure any longer that he should so cruelly misunderstand her. ‘It is not that—you know it is not that. You cannot think that I meant any mere difference of rank.’

‘What is it then? what can it be? Believe me there is nothing—there can be nothing—to keep us apart;’ and he came nearer to her, with a movement as though he would have taken her to himself then and there and held her his for ever.

But she started from her seat and waved him off with an imperative gesture.

‘Listen,’ she said; ‘only be patient for one moment, and I will tell you what it

is.' Then suddenly changing her tone to one of entreaty she said, 'Oh, do listen and be pitiful!—I told you that I loved you because I was weak and my fear drove me to it But there is so much besides.'

'What is there?' said Herne.

'Oh!' she said, 'there is one's love for one's father and mother, and for one's brothers and sisters, for one's home and for all the things that one has been brought up to care for—and there is one's faith in God.' Once more she paused, hoping that he would answer and so reinforce her strength by opposition. But he was silent, and she had to gather up her strength by an inward effort and find words in her own mind only. She went on desperately. 'And it seems to me that since I have known you I have somehow drifted away from all these things, and that night when you were

out in the storm I first discovered how far I had gone. You are stronger than I am. But do not take advantage of my weakness, for I must speak the truth to you because you know it already, and I could not bear that you should despise me as you would do if I pretended that it was worldly things that stood between us. It is not worldly things. It is that you are carrying me away, and that I am too much confused and bewildered to know clearly whether I ought to follow.'

'But why should you be afraid to follow? Our love will make a heaven for us both in which all mere differences of creed will seem of very little consequence. See how small they must be since they have not been able to keep our souls apart.'

But Laura answered sadly,—

'No, no; they are not small. I said there was a gulf between us—and your

words only help to make me feel how wide it is. To you these things are nothing—but to me they are everything. I could not be content unless we believed together.'

'We would believe in one another,' said Herne.

'That is not enough,' answered Laura. 'That frightens me, but in the other I think there would be rest. Oh, surely there must be truths that are larger and more fixed than the love of any man or woman. I used to feel that it was so. Sarah feels it; she felt it in the storm when I was all adrift and could not pray or trust. I think I should feel it again in a little time. If you gave me a little time to think,' she ended.

'A little time,' said Herne bitterly, 'during which all the old influences will be about you, and your conscience will persuade your heart against me. Oh,

Laura, if I thought you did not love me, I would leave you without another word, though to leave you would be to give up heaven. But you do love me. And yet you ask me to leave you. And this I cannot do. It is cruel to ask it.'

'Oh no, not cruel!' she said; 'I am not cruel—but I am unhappy. I want to go home to my mother. She will help me to know what is right. But if I ought to decide now, I can only say,—Good-bye.' And she held out her hand in farewell. But Herne did not take it.

There was silence between them for the space of a few seconds.

Laura had said 'good-bye,' and she had fancied that the word would end her struggle—that he would take her hand and press it sorrowfully, give her one last look, and go for ever.

But instead of going, he stood in front of her, silent and motionless. Her eyes

were cast down, but she felt that his were bent on her. Suddenly she looked up and met them in a straight, full gaze.

He did not move, he did not speak. And she did not turn away, but kept her eyes fixed steadily on his. It seemed to her that she had never really met his look before,—never felt its warmth, or drunk its tenderness,—never known how large and full and deep it was.

With every moment now, she felt that it was growing more tender and more full—larger, bluer, deeper. It was as if his inmost soul were opening for hers to pass into it.

And all the while he was so still and calm, as if he knew that he had but to wait and she would recall her word and come to him. Her own doubt was melting under his conviction, her weakness was yielding to his strength—and she could no longer oppose argument

to impulse. Sarah's words spoken in the storm came to her mind,—

'At times like this, we can only stand still and wait upon the Lord.'

The Lord?

But who and what was Lord?—Love, Conscience, God, or Man?

A few minutes ago, she had talked of her faith in God, of her home and her own people—saying that these stood between her and Maurice. And now all at once it seemed to her that God and home were in the eyes of the man who loved her and whom she loved.

She could not turn away from his eyes any more. They held her. They drew her. She felt herself rising from her chair—moving, in spite of herself, towards him.

'Oh, what is it?' she moaned, 'what is it? Do not leave me. I cannot live without you.'

And she stumbled forward and glided upon her knees—to the ground—at his feet. ‘O God—Maurice—help me!’

And in a moment he had caught her in his arms, and she was clinging to him and uttering low broken sounds, and he was answering with words of love.

And she felt that she could never doubt again—she knew that for good or evil she was his for ever.



CHAPTER IX.

‘To him that taketh away thy cloak, forbid not to take thy coat also.’

LAURA stayed on at Llanoun for two days more, and found confirmation and comfort in her sister's sympathy. For Lady Sarah, having once taken her part, was eager to help her through all difficulties. She undertook to propitiate Lord Rhoos, and wrote immediately to tell him of what had passed, and to beg him to lose no time in coming to Ardgwen and doing all he could to promote Laura's happiness, which she most earnestly assured him depended upon this marriage. And

she told Laura that she might count with certainty upon his help. At which Laura looked doubtful. Sarah's confidence was, however, not to be shaken.

'You none of you know Rhos,' she said.

Laura made no answer: she was very well aware that she did not know Rhos, but she was none the less sure that he would not be on her side.

However, she did not feel afraid. Herne's love and Sarah's sympathy seemed enough to her. She believed they would carry her through, and she started homewards full of happy confidence.

But by the time she reached Ardgwen she felt her courage dying away, and she wished she had allowed Herne to write at once to her father instead of stipulating for a week's respite.

She had said, 'I must have a few days

to think it over with my mother.' But when she found herself at home again, it was not to Lady St. Asaph, but to Cassandra, that she thought she would tell her story first.

She went to the rectory directly after breakfast on the day following her return home, and met her cousin in the garden.

Cassandra was on her way to the castle, impelled by a restless anxiety for news. The idea that the visit to Llanoun would bring Herne to the point of a declaration to Laura had never once quitted her since the night of the dance; and, though she had heard of his visit to the rectory on the following morning, as he had not followed it up by a letter, she had been unable to find in it any assurance of an intention to be guided by her warning. Indeed the most probable explanation of his visit seemed to her that, having reflected upon her

hints and resolved to disregard them, he had come from a sense of honour to tell her so. The fortnight that had passed since had been to her a time of almost greater unrest than to Laura herself.

‘It is good for you to come and see me so soon,’ she said. ‘I was just starting to come to you. How are you?’ She smiled as she spoke, and tried to feel that there was not necessarily any special significance in Laura’s prompt visit.

‘Don’t praise me, or I shall feel that I am a humbug,’ answered Laura, going straight to the point. ‘I have come because I wanted to tell you something—something that has happened to me and that I want your advice about. Will you help me, Cassie?’

The forced smile died from Cassandra’s lips. She knew what was coming, and for a moment all power of dissimulation forsook her. And yet it was only what

she had been schooling herself to bear for months past—what she had foreseen with certainty on the first evening of Herne's first visit to Ardgwen. She had thought over and over again how she should feel when Laura came and told her that she was going to marry Maurice Herne: she had purposely accustomed herself to the idea, so that the fact might not take her off her guard. And now the moment was come, and Laura was standing before her with the news that was no news trembling on her lips, and she felt as unprepared as though the bolt had fallen from a blue sky.

Laura put up her face to kiss her, and she recoiled from her as from some bright beautiful creature that has a deadly sting.

Laura was too much pre-occupied with her own thoughts to be minutely observant of others. She noticed, however,

that Cassandra started, and she thought she must have alarmed her by the seriousness of her manner.

‘Oh, don’t look like that!’ she said; ‘it is not anything dreadful. I did not mean to frighten you.’

Cassandra made a weak attempt at a smile. But she still avoided Laura’s kiss. There were half-formed purposes within her that would have made it a hideous mockery.

She said in a tone of forced lightness, ‘I am glad your news is not dreadful. It is a foolish habit with me always to expect bad news when people tell me they have something to say to me. Come into the house, and we will have a chat.’

But Laura preferred to stay outside. It would be easier to tell her story in the course of a walk than sitting within doors. And Cassandra was of the same

mind with regard to listening. So they agreed to have their talk in the open air.

They passed out of the garden in silence, neither of them speaking till they were well away from houses and people. Then, when the village was behind them and they were alone on the hill-side, Laura began her story.

She went right back to the beginning of her acquaintance with Herne, reminding Cassandra how she had been prejudiced against him before his coming to Ardgwen, and detailing step by step of her passage from prejudice to her present state of feeling. Much she dwelt on her resistance to the dawning inclination, much on her efforts to withdraw herself from the new influence. She omitted nothing from the narrative save her misconception about Cassandra. That was a part of the subject she instinctively avoided.

Not that any doubt remained in her mind after Maurice's distinct assertion that he and Cassandra were mutually free. She believed him entirely and was satisfied that her notion had been without foundation. But the recollection of it was disagreeable to her.

So all that had reference to Cassandra was omitted from Laura's confession; and Cassandra, walking by her side in silence, felt that her own part in the affair must have been an illusion—a dream that she had dreamed, in which she and Laura and Maurice had figured with the vividness of waking life, but which could have had no existence in fact, since all the while Laura and Maurice had been playing a drama of their own in which she had had no part.

Was it fancy, she asked herself, that she and Maurice had sat together in the library on the night of the dance and

that she had been betrayed into uttering words of which the echo still startled her inward ear? Was it fancy that Laura had come in and discovered them in the attitude of love-making? Was it possible that she had seen nothing, guessed nothing—that there had been nothing to see and guess? and had she, Cassandra, been ashamed without cause? Her mind grew inattentive, and she did not observe that Laura had finished her story and was waiting for her to reply.

‘Well, Cassie, why don’t you speak? What do you think?’

‘It is for *you* to think,’ said Cassandra, startled into attention, and catching at the first words that suggested themselves.

‘Oh, but I have thought, and thought, and thought, and I can get no further than I was at the beginning. I thought

you would be able to help me. There is no one else who can.'

Laura's eyes were filling with tears. A great sadness, of a kind new to her, seemed suddenly to have entered her life. A responsibility had come to her which she might not shift on to the judgment of another, or even share in sisterly equality with her nearest friend. Cassandra understood her, but she felt no compassion and she did not hasten to answer.

No one knew better than she what such sadness was. Her own life had been steeped in it. And hitherto in her intercourse with Laura she had striven continually to save her from like experience by anticipating with quick sympathy the different stages of her mind's development. It had seemed a sort of atonement to her own poisoned girlhood to make its lessons serve to help

another, and the half-motherly, half-sisterly affection that she had cherished for Laura had been one of the best influences in both their lives, mellowing the character of the older woman and strengthening that of the younger. Amid many painful memories and self-condemning thoughts, it made a bright spot in Cassandra's consciousness to know that she had given Laura such friendship as might have made her own life happy. And now this was the result of it,—Laura had robbed her of the one chance of personal happiness that life held for her, and she must give her sympathy and encouragement and never betray the anguish it would cost her.

For a moment she said to herself that she would not do it; that to pretend to rejoice in Laura's joy would be a piece of base hypocrisy—a sort of injustice to herself that could not be demanded of

her. What right had Laura to take all the happiness and know nothing of the cost? What right had she to ask sympathy for herself and never stop to think whether others did not need it more?

It was a moment of terrible temptation to Cassandra. She knew the strength of her influence; she had but to speak a word, and Laura would put aside as a perilous snare the joy that had been offered her. But that was not what she desired. She did not so much grudge Laura happiness as rebel against her taking it in ignorance of its cost. It seemed to her that the one soul-satisfying vent her wretchedness could find was in blurting out the story of her own suffering; and that, having spoken, she could creep aside and bear her disappointment silently for evermore. Oh! it had been bitter long ago to learn that the world was less fair than she had

deemed it, but it was far bitterer now to know that the fair things she had recovered faith in were never to be hers. The whole of life had seemed once to stretch around her like a grey desert, meaningless and boundless. Now the desert was narrowed to her own lot, and its boundaries were Edens of blessedness reserved for others, and her thought of sweetest consolation was an impulse to lay waste the pleasant places from which she was cast out.

It was a moment of fierce temptation, and she was on the point of yielding—when Laura slid her hand into hers and renewed her appeal for help.

The familiar touch revived the old habit of affection, and she answered involuntarily, 'I will help you all I can.' And then, with a grim regret, she realised that she had pledged herself to forego the barren revenge she coveted.

Laura's face brightened.

'I knew you would,' she said; 'and I knew that whatever you might say, you would not be hard on *him*. Because you have always taken his part and said it was possible to be good and honourable and yet hold his opinions; you do think so, don't you?'

'Certainly I do,' said Cassandra; 'and I think I ought to tell you that I hold the same opinions myself.'

It was a blunt confession, for which Laura was wholly unprepared; though it hardly surprised her more than it did Cassandra herself, who uttered it without premeditation—partly because she knew that it would be more substantially comforting than the tenderest expressions of sympathy, and partly also because these were not yet possible to her.

'*You!*' cried Laura in amazement.

‘And you go to church and teach in the schools and do just like other people. How strange!’

‘How dishonest! you might say,’ put in Cassandra; ‘but I am a coward, and I do not like to make myself singular.’

A new vista was opening before Laura. It was evidently possible for young women to arrive at sceptical conclusions without being under the influence of sceptical husbands. It might happen to her, then, to reject Maurice’s love and sympathy and find that she could not reject his opinions. It might happen to her to hold them without sympathy as Cassandra had done, and like Cassandra she might not have courage to be true to them. The prospect frightened her.

‘Do your opinions make you very sad?’ she asked.

‘Oh,’ said Cassandra sadly, ‘that is an impossible question to answer. Few

people are altogether happy, and I have never been able to see that happiness or unhappiness belonged specially to any one set of opinions. Happiness is all accident, I sometimes think.'

'How do you mean? Surely it must make a difference to one's happiness what sort of hopes and beliefs one has about this world and the next, and one's soul, and other people's. To me it seems very sad to think as you and Maurice Herne do.'

Cassandra answered more gently,—

'That is because you know very little of what we do think. You only know that we disbelieve things you never dreamed of doubting till a few months ago. To me who have lived outside your faith for years, it seems that believers and unbelievers have about an even share of happiness. Or perhaps, if I were to speak quite honestly, I should say that

I think the largest share both of joy and of sorrow belongs to those who are in sympathy with the best thought of their own day.'

'And is that what Maurice is?'

'I think so,' said Cassandra, and then they were both silent for a few minutes.

Suddenly Laura said,—

'Tell me how you came to have opinions like his?'

And Cassandra, who had till now avoided her eyes, darted a swift questioning look at them. Was it possible that Laura had no suspicion? Evidently it was; for Laura did not look away, but merely repeated her question.

Long afterwards, Laura, thinking over this conversation by the light of subsequent events, wondered at her own obtuseness, and blamed herself for the pain her want of perception had caused her to inflict. But while the conver-

sation was actually taking place, her interest and curiosity were too fully engrossed to leave room for any thought outside the immediate question. Her own life had grown so large and full that it spread over the whole universe and translated all facts and all experience into language of self. She felt it an important fact that Cassandra's convictions should be identical with Maurice Herne's, but important only in so far as it tended in the direction of her own wishes.

‘Do tell me how you came to have these opinions?’ she said.

‘It is a long story,’ answered Cassandra, ‘and not a happy one.’

‘Then you do think such opinions make one sad?’

Laura would not go without her answer on this point. And Cassandra was conscious of a growing irritation under the

pressure. The iron had entered into her own soul and left scars on which it was intolerable that triflers should lay an idle finger-tip. She restrained herself however, and answered quietly,—

‘ I think all change of belief makes one sad. Doubt is terrible, especially if one has to meet it alone. And to me doubt came when I was very young through the influence of a person whom I had believed to be very good and pure, and who proved in the end to be extremely bad. It was years ago, when you were a child—before I knew Maurice—when I was away at school. This woman disappointed me and made me doubt, not only the goodness and truth of God, but the existence of any goodness in man or woman. For a long time I believed in nothing, in no one, and then I was very miserable. But in time I began again to believe in my fellow-creatures and in

the existence of a law of right and wrong, but not——’

‘Not in God?’

‘No, that belief has never come back.’

‘Do you wish that it should? Can you be happy without it?’

Cassandra could bear no more: this insistence upon being happy wore a look of insult to her. She broke out impatiently, ‘It is not fair to make my happiness the test of truth. I am as happy as other people are, when things go well with me within and without. You do not suppose, do you, that people who believe in God are always happy, any more than they that always do right? It is idle cant to pretend that they are, and of no use to you, or me, or any one.’

She spoke with a vehement scorn that made Laura wince. She had not meant to wound her cousin, and did not under-

stand what she had said to make her so angry.

‘I am very sorry if I have said anything silly,’ she said.

Cassandra was sorry too.

‘No, no,’ she said; ‘it is I who am silly to lose my temper. The fact is, you only hinted what all the orthodox world says in one way or another, that we who do not believe must be wrong because we are not altogether and always happy; and I made a vicarious sacrifice of you. But all the same it is a mistake to think about happiness when you are seeking truth. . . . Oh, Laura, Laura, there is very little happiness in the world—so little that I sometimes think that the chief use of religion is to teach us to be content without it.’

Cassandra stopped; her voice was broken by tears, and she could not trust herself to say more.

‘But if there is so little happiness,’ said Laura, ‘surely there is peace for those who are doing right?’

‘Yes, there is peace at the end for those who have fought on so as to escape remorse. But peace is not what you think. Life is an awful struggle, and peace comes only now and then when we are tired out. Or it waits for us, and we find it at last when we are old and it is too late for happiness. But very few are happy.’

Cassandra spoke in a tone of weary despair that discouraged Laura from pressing her further. And yet she could not rest satisfied without getting some advice from her as to how she should act in the present crisis. After a silence of a few minutes she said,—

‘I think we have wandered away from the point. What I want you to tell me is what you think would be right for me

to do. It does not seem right to change all one's opinions for the sake of . . . of some one person that one cares for. But then I think that, whatever I decided to do, I could not go back to my old way of thinking. Sometimes the new way seems wrong, but more often I think it is really more right and more noble than the other. And then again—I don't know—it may only seem right because I wish to think it so. And I want to do right—I do really, Cassandra, though I cannot help wishing to be happy too. I cannot help it, if I am not as strong as you are. What am I to do?'

While she was speaking they had come to a stile, and Laura, instead of crossing it, had stopped walking and leaned against the wooden rail. Cassandra was obliged to wait too, and in order to avoid Laura's eyes, she busied herself with nipping the brown buds off a branch of young elm

that overhung the stile. Every word of Laura's was a stab, and for every stab she must by-and-by give payment in help and sympathy. In the meantime she must vent her pain somehow—and the innocent elm-buds fell, to save Laura from revelations that would have scared her from the happiness she was on the point of grasping.

But when Laura put the direct question, Cassandra could avoid her eyes no longer ; she let the elm-bough swing back and turned with desperate resolution towards her questioner.

‘What are you to ‘do?’ she said; ‘why marry Maurice Herne of course, if your father and mother will let you. He cares for you and you care for him. You will soon think alike on all subjects, and you will make one another happy.’

Then she moved away from the stile,

and, remarking that it was time to turn back, began to walk homeward.

She had said just what Laura wished her to say, and yet Laura felt as if she had given her a blow, for there was a note of irony in her voice as she said, 'You will soon think alike on all subjects and you will make one another happy,'—as if to think alike and to be happy were a sort of childish folly with which she could not sympathise and would rather hear no more about.

Poor Cassandra! it had cost her much to say those words. To say them at all was heroic, and yet they sounded cruel to Laura, as a sacrifice of bulls and goats might seem mere butchery to an on-looker, ignorant of the sacrificial meaning of the act. Certainly she did not mean to be ironical, but our words sometimes take on a tone without consulting our will, and Cassandra's mood just then was

not free from that bitterness tinged with contempt which those who have seen storm and shipwreck entertain for idlers who trim their pleasure-boats to sail beneath a summer sky.

They walked back to the village in silence, and as they parted at the rectory gate both felt that their affection for one another had suffered a hurt. It seemed to Laura that Cassandra had failed in tenderness at a moment when tenderness was especially due ; and to Cassandra, in spite of great efforts to be charitable, it seemed that Laura was unpardonably obtuse in the absorbing egoism of her young love.



CHAPTER X.

‘Many things, having full reference to one consent, may work contrariously.’

WHILE Laura was telling her story to Cassandra, Lady St. Asaph was nervously awaiting her at home. She had received two letters, one from Lady Sarah and one from Lord Rhoo, both alluding to Laura's love-affair as a thing which must have been already confided to her. Lady Sarah seemed very clear on the subject, satisfied that Herne and Laura were well-suited to one another, and full of arguments against all possible objections that might be raised. Lord Rhoo

merely said that having heard from Sarah of Herne's proposal to Laura, he had put off going to Paris for a few days in order to come down to Ardgwen and talk the matter over.

Lady St. Asaph read the letters with a sense of bewilderment. Laura had said nothing to her on the subject, and Laura was not wont to have secrets from her. For the rest, she was not entirely unprepared. The reader remembers perhaps that when the party at Llanoun broke up, the Walworths and Lady Mary Vane had come on to Ardgwen. Lady Mary had lost no time in warning her mother of the dangerous position in which she considered that Laura stood towards Maurice Herne; and there had been much discussion on the subject, in the course of which Lady St. Asaph had the satisfaction of receiving back from her daughter many admirable

theories and maxims which she had herself instilled into her long ago. Lady Mary said how she believed Laura to be in a very sentimental frame of mind, and how she thought it a great pity that a more practical direction had not been given to her training—she had always observed that these foolish attachments were the result of a vague up-bringing. At which Lady St. Asaph winced, for she was conscious of having let Laura grow up with very little direction. She had grown doubtful in her middle-age of many of the theories of her youth, and having conscientiously trained three daughters in the way her earlier principles said they should go, she had allowed the fourth to take the way of her own tastes and temperament. But her conscience had never been quite easy in so doing, and now that it was hinted plainly that she had been blamable, she was without defence.

She could only ask what there was in Maurice Herne that made an attachment to him of necessity foolish, at which Mary shrugged her shoulders and remarked dryly that a man of thirty who had not succeeded in making more mark in the world than he had could hardly be hero enough to justify an attachment against which there were so many *à priori* objections. And in this opinion Lady Walworth had concurred. To her mind that sort of man was altogether a mistake. It was not because he was poor that she objected to him, or that she was exclusive about birth. Nothing of that sort. Maurice Herne was welcome to be anybody's son, or nobody's. She would not have cared if he had been a cobbler or a stonemason, provided he stood well on his legs and let the world know that he chose to be a cobbler or a stonemason.

But she objected to Laura's marrying a man who was clerk in a Government office merely because he had been too indolent to make himself anything else. Maurice Herne was a pleasant enough fellow as he was, and she was always glad to have him at her house. But then, when he was married, things would be considerably changed. He and Laura would just be able to scramble along and keep two servants and go nowhere. 'The fact is,' said Lady Walworth, 'there are some people who are like kittens, very nice till they settle down into middle-aged cats, when they are apt to be rather in the way. And Maurice Herne, unless I am much mistaken, is one of these.'

It was not very long ago that Lady St. Asaph herself had spoken of Herne somewhat slightly as a person who wanted backbone. And the recollection of this prevented her from directly contradicting

her daughter's opinion. Besides which Laura was her favourite child, and her great love for her disposed her to be rather exacting as to the qualities of the man to whom she should be given. But then, on the other hand, her very love for Laura disinclined her to say aught against the man on whom she had bestowed her affection. The idea that Laura cared for him placed him on a pedestal and made his very weaknesses look like virtues misunderstood. So she gave evasive answers to her daughters, and professed to think that their solicitude was, to say the least of it, premature.

But this afternoon's letters proved that it was not so. Herne had evidently proposed to Laura while they were staying at Llanoun, and the time for evasion was past. She must speak to Laura on the subject as soon as she came in, and she must make up her own mind definitely

for or against the marriage. This was no easy task to Lady St. Asaph, and she found herself reading her son's letter over and over again in the vain hope that she might discover some indication of the side to which he leaned; for since he had bestirred himself to come down and discuss the matter, she felt that much deference would be due to his opinion,—or rather she knew that whichever way her own sympathies might tend, her action would finally be guided by him. For strong-minded woman as she was, Lady St. Asaph was much in fear of this eldest son of hers, whose way of life she wholly disapproved and whose probable opinion on any subject in heaven or earth she was always helpless to anticipate. She could defy her daughters; she had the courage when necessary to go contrary to her own traditions; she had ruled her husband for years, but she

was a coward in the presence of her son. She feared him somewhat as ignorant populations fear heavenly bodies of eccentric and incalculable orbits.

She was still engaged in reading over his letter, when Laura came in perturbed and tearful from her unsatisfactory interview with Cassandra. She was eager now to confide in her mother and inclined to be sure of sympathy, if for no better reason than that she needed it utterly.

‘I have heard from Sarah,’ said Lady St. Asaph; ‘and she has told me—— But why did you not tell me yourself, my child?’

Laura could not say why, and did not attempt to do so. She was only glad that the ice was broken, and, without more ado, she sat down beside her mother and told her story over again.

It was such a story as Lady St.

Asaph would probably have heard with strong disapprobation twenty or thirty years ago ; perhaps even now, had the heroine been any other than Laura. Her own youth had been lived without sympathy, and her own marriage had been entered upon without love. And in arranging the marriages of her elder daughters she had been true to the traditions of her youth, and had thought more of a certain dignified fitness than of any special affinity of heart and spirit. Indeed though her womanly instinct excluded for her children as for herself marriages that were not capable of developing a sort of dutiful affection between husband and wife, the most worldly match-making was hardly more repugnant to her feelings than a passion that could carry a girl into forgetfulness of the traditions of her birth and breeding. The abandonment of such passionate

attachments revolted her sense of the supreme obligation to be at all times dignified and decorous, and she seldom let pass an opportunity of expressing herself strongly in this sense. But, though her expressed opinions on the subject of matrimony had remained honourably consistent, her feelings had undergone a very considerable change since the days when she consented to marry Lord St. Asaph. She had learned that something had been wanting to her own marriage. And now, as she listened to Laura's faltering confession of how she had learned to love the stranger, it seemed to her that a new revelation had come to her in her old age, and she forgot prudence and gave herself up to sympathy. And when at last Laura said, 'What shall I do, mother? He will write in a day or two. He will come, I think. What will you say to him?

What may I do?' the only advice she could give was that Laura should follow her own heart. 'If you love him, marry him,' she said. 'You will be happy.'

Laura was startled. She had expected her mother to be gentle and sympathetic, because to *her* she was never otherwise, but she had not looked for such unmeasured sympathy as this.

'Do you mean it?' she asked. 'But what will my father say—and Rhos and the others?'

Lady St. Asaph felt uncomfortable; she had forgotten about Rhos for the moment, and did not quite know how to answer now. She rose from her seat and began pacing up and down the room while Laura sat wondering at the strange turn that things were taking. Somehow since that day when Herne first came to Ardgwen and proved a wholly different person from what she had im-

agined, everything had gone contrary to her expectation, but nothing that had yet happened had surprised her more than the girl-like eagerness with which her mother had given the reins to her sympathy and overleaped the obstacles that had seemed formidable even to herself.

‘Do you really mean it, mother?’ she asked again.

‘Yes, yes, I mean it,’ said Lady St. Asaph, still pacing up and down the room and speaking with agitation; ‘I mean it. There is no happiness in marriage without love. I did not think it always, but it is true nevertheless. I have felt it—— I mean, I have seen it. Life is difficult, and one must do one’s duty. But it is easier when one loves. Much easier. You will be very happy, my child.’

There was a strange expression in

Lady St. Asaph's face, a strange emotion at her heart. She looked with a sort of wistful envy on this young daughter to whom she knew that she ought to preach worldly wisdom. She could not do it; she felt rather inclined to bid Laura preach to her.

So she told her son, when he came in the evening.

'I have been a fool,' she said, 'but I could not help it. And it will be the same if I have to speak to her again. If the marriage is not to be, *you* must tell her so—I *cannot*.'

'H'm,' said Rhoos.

'I know you are thinking it is all my fault for having let him come here in the first instance. I never thought of anything of this kind happening. With your other sisters, things were different. And then we all believed him to be in love with Cassandra.'

‘H’m,’ said Rhoos again.

‘Did not *you* think he was going to marry Cassandra?’

‘Well, no, I can’t say I did exactly. He only cared for her theoretically.’

‘But she cares for him. You think that?’

‘To say so now would be hardly chivalrous, nor yet much to the point; Cassandra, not having been proposed to by Herne, cannot marry him; Laura on the other hand *has* been proposed to, and her case is ripe for consideration.’

‘What is your opinion?’

‘I really don’t know that I have one. What is yours?’

‘Laura is very much in love with him.’

‘So Sarah told me. The storm startled her into a sort of declaration.’

‘Hardly that,’ said Lady St. Asaph, jealous for her daughter’s dignity. ‘But she seems to have betrayed very strong

feeling for him ; so strong that I should say, unless there are very serious objections to the marriage, it should be allowed. Otherwise it seems to me that——’

‘In fact you think that Laura’s—what I must not call declaration—has compromised her dignity. Is not that it, mother?’

‘I have some such feeling,’ said Lady St. Asaph. ‘What do you think yourself?’

‘As a man, I cannot pretend to an opinion on such a delicate question as a woman’s dignity.’

‘That is unfair. Men marry women and cannot therefore pretend to have no opinion on what relates to their conduct. Put the case of a woman you were in love with——’

‘All would depend on circumstances. If I were in love with a woman, and she were kind enough to tell me unasked

that she was in love with me, I should certainly think she ought to marry me ; but, if she made the same declaration to another man, I should think she ought *not* to marry him, as her doing so would interfere with my own designs. Such questions cannot be decided upon abstract principles.'

'How are they to be decided then?'

Lord Rhoos shrugged his shoulders. 'By expediency, self-interest, and resignation to the inevitable.'

'I do not understand you,' said Lady St. Asaph. 'Why will you not tell me plainly what you think ought to be done?'

'Because I don't know. Probably Herne ought to be sent about his business, and Laura married out of hand to some more eligible person. But, then, I ought equally to marry an eligible person and do a thousand things that I never

shall do, simply because I can't. What ought to be done is an unpractical question—I gave it up long ago.'

'Then you think Laura had better marry him?'

Lady St. Asaph spoke as timidly as though it were her own future that was hanging in the scales.

'It is probably the best thing she can do.'

'He is very poor.'

'Women like poverty. Besides, my father's interest will get him something.'

'Your father's interest is Conservative, and Maurice Herne is an advanced Liberal.'

'Extremes meet. Herne has been discovering lately that Radicalism is only the latest development of Conservatism. Tory interest, as a stepping-stone to Laura's hand, will complete his conversion.'

‘ You think him weak.’

‘ No. He is bitten with impracticable notions and as inconsistent as most people who want to be better than their neighbours. Not more so.’

‘ You like him ? ’

‘ Yes.’

‘ And your father likes him ? ’

‘ Yes.’

‘ But you doubt his liking the marriage ? ’

‘ He will want persuading. But I will undertake the business if you like.’

‘ How will you do it ? ’

‘ I shall tell him that Herne is coming to ask his permission to marry Laura. He will be indignant on principle. I shall accept his objections as decisive and offer to write instantly and tell Herne not to come—alluding incidentally to the impossibility of his ever being seen in the house again. This will lead to

reconsideration. My father will reflect that Herne is a pleasant fellow—the only man in short that he cares much to cultivate. We shall discuss the thing over again and discover possibilities not thought of before; and the end of it will be that Herne will come and be received as son-in-law elect. Will you trust the thing to me?’

‘Thankfully,’ said Lady St. Asaph. And then, blushing as Laura herself might have blushed, she added, ‘You do not know how happy you have made me. I thought you would take the worldly view. I can hardly believe now that you will not change your mind.’

Rhoos dreaded a scene. He moved away and answered drily,—

‘No, my sympathies are really enlisted. Laura is as unfit, in her way, for correct life in the best English society as I am in mine. She would not succeed as a

great lady, and family pride makes me wish to spare her a failure.'

Lady St. Asaph said nothing: she feared she had made a fool of herself again.

'Has anything been seen of Cassandra since this affair?' asked Rhoos after a pause.

'Laura was with her to day. I do not know what passed between them. Why do you ask?'

'H'm,' said Rhoos once more. And there the conversation ended.

Rhoos found his father rather more difficult to manage than he had anticipated. Nevertheless, the result of their interview substantially justified his confidence. And before he returned to London, it was arranged that, though there was to be no actual engagement just yet and no correspondence between the lovers, still if they both continued

in the same mind and something could be found which would add a little to Herne's income, the subject might be reopened at the end of six months. In the meantime Laura was to go to London and prove her constancy amid the pomps and glories of a 'season.' Lady Walworth was to chaperone her, and it was understood that, as far as possible, she was to be guarded against meeting Herne.



CHAPTER XI.

‘O sovereign power of love ! O grief ! O balm !
All records, saving thine, come cool, and calm,
And shadowy, through the mist of passed years ;
For others, good or bad, hatred and tears
Have become indolent ; but touching thine,
One sigh doth echo, one poor sob doth pine,
One kiss brings honey-dew from buried days.’

IN a corner of Cassandra’s room there stood an old-fashioned oak cupboard, rudely carved on the outside, and furnished within with many drawers cunningly contrived as secret hiding-places.

Cassandra had taken a fancy to it at a second-hand furniture shop at Cresford one holiday-time many years ago, and

had bought it with her pocket-money—thinking it would be a convenient shrine in which to deposit all those treasures of correspondence and young literary effort that marked for her the beginning of an individual mental life.

In it she stowed away the small yearly volumes of her journal; the bulkier ones into which she copied all that charmed her most in reading, the letters that she valued, and her own attempts at composition; and, later, the memorials of her friendship with Maurice Herne.

It was years since she had opened it—years since she had felt any inclination to add to its stores. And yet she carried in her mind a pretty accurate inventory of its contents; and of some of those hoarded relics the thought was almost hourly with her.

Just now they haunted her with especial intensity, and after that walk with

Laura, she frequently found herself lingering before the long-neglected cupboard and playing wistfully with its key. It seemed to her that, behind those panels of carved wood-work, there lived yet the past with which she was now called to break for ever, and she yearned as passionately for a last communing with it as a dying one yearns for a last embrace of the beloved whose sole presence makes the world worthy of regret. But as the stern monitions of priestly counsellors might intervene between a soul claimed for a passionless eternity and such last indulgence of unhallowed passion, so all thoughts of prudence forbade the act to which she leaned. She knew that to open those doors, and pore over the papers they enclosed, would be to let loose the emotions it was already hardly possible for her to stem—to turn back and embrace temptations

from which she had been long-time flying. And again and again she thrust the key back into her pocket and turned resolutely from the tempting doors to busy herself about some forced occupation in the house or the village.

But at last one night she yielded.

Through hours of troubled sleep and feverish waking, the cupboard and its contents had haunted her. Winter moonlight was flooding the room, cruelly illumining her loneliness. She ached for sympathy. She could forego it no longer. The past should give it her, since the present denied it.

She got out of bed and possessed herself once more of the key. In a moment she had unlocked the door, and the little system of drawers that she had not seen for so many years was open before her.

Which should she ransack first? The deep lower one in which were stored her

letters from Maurice and the rolls of her manuscript freely annotated in his hand?

Her fingers closed around its handle, but they trembled so that she could not turn it.

No, she would not open that drawer yet—she would look at some of her earlier treasures first, and come to these later ones step by step, as they had come to her in actual fact.

She took out one of the upper drawers and emptied its contents upon her bed. They consisted chiefly of extracts from favourite writers, and one or two indifferent poetic effusions of her own. They did not interest her much. Neither did the moral essays, nor the closely-written journals, nor the unfinished romance that filled the next, and the next, and the next. But she glanced through them all in order, with a feeling that to make a systematic revision of her past was to

justify in a manner the final indulgence to which it was the approach.

At last the turn of the lower drawer came.

She no longer hesitated, but drew it out quickly and set it on her writing-table. Then, kneeling before it, she began to empty it with eager, trembling hands. At the top lay a little vellum book with gilt clasps and corners. She did not want to look at that now—she laid it on the table behind the drawer. Next came the rolls of manuscript—the last Herne had sent back to her from Oxford. The very paper in which they had travelled still curled round them, and she could read her address written on them in his hand.

She opened one roll and began reading half-aloud to herself. This was a maturer work than the pages of poetry and ethics that occupied the other drawers. It was

a translation of Faust, undertaken at Herne's suggestion in the days when they were most together. Their plan had been to publish it with a critical study in the form of a dialogue, which should take the drama as its text and evolve from it the religious future of the world. Only a very small part of the dialogue had ever been completed; and the translation, though substantially written, had never undergone final revision, for, while it was still in hand, the quarrel had happened which had stopped their friendship and all its pleasant results, and Cassandra had never had the heart to finish alone the task they had begun together.

She began reading her translation, and started—half in pain, half in pleasure—at the discovery that it was a much greater work than she had believed at the time she was engaged upon it. The theme

had been an inspiring one. The disappointed philosopher eager to part with all his knowledge in exchange for a day of vanished youth, the man of pleasure consumed by inextinguishable remorse for the ruin of his plaything, the long seeking through the mazes of all time and thought for the day worth bidding linger, the final satisfaction in the work of human usefulness—had been her gospel; and, unconsciously, she had interpreted with genius the genius of the poet. She recognised this now, and wondered how it might have told upon her destiny if she had published the work years ago.

Then, impatient of the vain speculation, she pushed away the manuscript and turned to Herne's own letters. One by one, she took them from their yellow covers and read them in the order in which they had been written. And as she read them by the light of her ripe

woman's experience, she saw clearly, between the lines of friendship and affection, the half-suppressed expression of the love she had underrated at the time when the letters were written. Then she had attended to the matter of the letters—discussing the theories, laughing over anecdotes, sympathising with the sentiments, encouraging the aspirations. Now all these seemed of very small account,—the theories were in great part exploded or discovered to be old truisms under new names, the sentiments and aspirations had had small result in action, the anecdotes were of people who had faded from her memory. But the devotion to herself, that breathed in every page, was fresh and living ; and, as she read, a sense of triumph came to her.

He had loved her first, and first love was best. What could he give to Laura that could compare with what he had

given her? The firstfruits of his manhood had been hers, and Laura could not take them from her. She had had his promise: to Laura he would give his failure. And the future would avenge her.

For had she not evidence that the past was not quite dead for him? That evening, when she sang, had he not come back to her with full devotion? That other evening, when he stood over her and asked her for one word,—promising that the future should be moulded by it,—was he not in earnest? She might have held him then if she had not been so proud, she might have been happy if she had not been mad.

And even now was it too late? He would be coming to Ardgwen, and they would meet, and she could recall him if she would. A song would do it, a word, a look! And why should she forbear? For whose sake? For Laura's?

Would Laura care to marry him if she could see these letters and know the full significance of the scenes at the piano and in the library?

Cassandra's face grew very hard in the moonlight. The last letter was read and returned to its cover. And she stood by the table looking hungrily into the drawer that was empty now, save for a few torn fragments of cardboard that lay scattered at the bottom. Some touches of colour on one of them caught her eye and started a new train of memories.

The bits of cardboard were fragments of a sketch she had made of Made-moiselle Azvedo in the days when she worshipped her, and had torn to pieces afterwards in the rage of her disappointment. She had entirely forgotten that they were there, and now, as she identified them, she was conscious of a leap of sympathy towards the sinning

woman whom she had so mercilessly condemned when life was still a thing of theory.

She felt no inclination to condemn her now. She was conscious of thoughts that lowered her to her level, of passionate impulses that might master her in an unguarded moment, of moods in which she almost prayed to be led into temptation. Between her and the outlawed woman whose picture she had disfigured in her girlish indignation she felt that there was little difference now but what was due to circumstances. And Cassandra was no Pharisee. For her, the whited sepulchre was a place of corruption equally with the unwhited.

‘Poor sinning woman!’ she thought; ‘perhaps you too had striven to be good. Perhaps you suffered and were lonely. And perhaps I, some day——’

But there she checked her thought.

Her fingers played nervously with the bits of cardboard; she wondered whether they were all there; she wanted to see the face again.

Suddenly it occurred to her that it might be possible to restore it, and she began putting the pieces together. The occupation fascinated her—she grew absorbed in it, and forgot the letters and papers that had engrossed her a few moments before. Bit by bit the picture grew together, till at last the whole face was before her—the beautiful face that had once exercised such a powerful influence upon her. She stood a little back and looked at it.

The face was very beautiful, certainly; but somehow it no longer fascinated her. There was something in it that repelled her. She wished that she had not restored it.

Then, with a sudden movement of

compunction, she bent down and kissed it tenderly, as though it had been the face of a sister whom she had ignorantly wronged.

As she did so, an accidental movement of her arm pushed aside the drawer and dislodged the little vellum book that rested on the edge of the table. It fell against the fender, and its corners rang hard upon the steel. Cassandra started in terror, unable for a moment to resist the impression that the noise was of supernatural origin. She was however quickly reassured by seeing the book lying on the floor.

As she stooped to pick it up the door opened and her mother entered.

‘Cassandra, what is the matter?’ she asked anxiously. ‘I heard a noise. Are you ill? What are you doing with all those letters?’

It was painful to Cassandra to be interrupted at such a moment, and she

would have given much that her mother should not see the papers with which she had been occupied ; for, on all the things to which they related, there had been silence between them always, and she could not bring herself suddenly to lay bare her griefs. She could not open her heart to her mother, and, that being the case, her presence was an added pain.

She made no attempt however to conceal either the picture or the letters that lay on the table : such small artifices were not in her way.

She came forward and took her mother's hand, meaning to lead her back to her room and say simply that just now she could not be disturbed. But when she looked into her mother's face, she experienced a sudden revulsion of feeling. The expression of it was very sad, and the eyes were red with weeping—they

showed signs of more than one night's sleeplessness. Cassandra knew instinctively that she was herself the cause of the tears and the sleeplessness. Her mother was grieving apart for her, longing for the confidence she could not give.

Cassandra often pitied herself for having a mother who could not enter into her best thoughts and most real life; now she reproached herself for being a daughter who was so little daughter-like. She laid her hands gently on her mother's shoulders and kissed the worn face tenderly—as she had kissed that of the singing-mistress a few seconds ago.

‘Dear mother,’ she said, ‘there is nothing the matter. It was only a little book that fell and made a noise. I am so sorry it disturbed you.’

‘But why are you not in bed, my child? You should not sit up all night

like this. You will be ill. Why do you do it ?’

‘I do not do it as a habit, mother. I was looking through old letters, and they interested me. I could not tear myself away from them. But now I am going to bed as soon as I have cleared away all this litter.’

‘Let me help you. And then I will put you to bed.’

Cassandra shook her head.

‘Then let me wait while you put the papers away. I want to see you in bed. It makes me uneasy to know you are unhappy ; for you *are* unhappy.’

Cassandra had sat down on the bed. Her mother’s presence was becoming torture. She rocked herself backwards and forwards with her hands clasped over her head.

‘You *are* unhappy,’ urged the mother.

‘Yes, yes,’ said Cassandra. ‘I am

unhappy, and you are unhappy, and it is a sad world, mother. But it cannot be helped.'

'Tell me what makes you unhappy,' Mrs. Gwynne persisted.

'Mother, I *cannot*. It is not my fault—but I *cannot*.'

There was a ring of agony in Cassandra's voice that came with sharp reproach to her mother's heart. She rose meekly, meaning to go.

'No, no,' she said, 'it is not your fault, it is mine. I know it—I say it to myself often. I ought not to have sent you away from me. But I was weak.—May God forgive me, and bless and comfort you at last.'

'Mother!' cried Cassandra; and she clung round her mother's neck, and sobbed upon her shoulder as she used to do when she was a little child.

While the embrace lasted, mother and

daughter felt very near to one another. But tears and caresses are but imperfect means of expression between human beings, and articulate confidences remained impossible to Cassandra. And so when Mrs. Gwynne went back to her room she was still in ignorance of the secret of her child's distress.

Cassandra returned to the writing-table and began replacing the papers in the empty drawer.

She no longer felt any inclination to linger over them. The past was still sweet to her, but she turned resolutely from its memories. The likeness of Mademoiselle Azvedo was as beautiful as ever, but she swept her hand over it and reduced it again to unintelligible fragments. She was still lonely, and her future looked even drearier in the grey dawn than in the glistening moonlight of an hour ago. Her mother had used no

arguments, and she had made no attempt to reason with herself. But, through that short interview, she had passed into a new phase of feeling, in which she felt ashamed of the selfishness of the mood it had displaced. What right had she to be so greedy for happiness while so many were unhappy? What right to be reckless and unprincipled while her life was a care to another? The vision of her mother's sadness touched her with a keen remorse. She knew herself to be the cause of it, and she could do nothing to relieve it. But she could add to it by giving the rein to such thoughts as had been with her to-night. And this she would not do. For her mother's sake she would still try to be good and resist the temptations of despair.

It was generally so with Cassandra. All strong currents of emotion were sure sooner or later to carry her beyond the

personal joy or grief, in which they had their origin, into some larger channel of sympathy with others. But hers was a nature to which abstract names of right and wrong appealed but weakly; the faith she lived by was fed by no personal or impersonal hopes to be realised in an inconceivable hereafter; right was not right for her unless it would bear fruit in visible increase of human happiness, nor wrong wrong unless it added to the great tale of human woe; to do justice though the heavens fell was a motto of insanity, for justice was not justice unless it bore the heavens up. Hence, moods of scepticism were very frequent with her in the long waiting times that go before the harvest, and she was quick to cry out that sacrifice had been in vain and right life a mad ideal—to repent of unselfish action and cry out with passionate egoism for a fuller share of the joys of

humanity. But from such moods the slightest hint of another's pain never failed to call her back. While any suffered because wrong had been done, she would suffer with them; while any toiled, however madly, along the hard path of right, she would stand by them; for joy would be no joy to her if it came stained with the tears of her brothers. So many a time has the image of a crucified God proved a more potent appeal to the fidelity of Christians than the joys or terrors of a far-off heaven or hell, and the ranks of the martyrs have in all ages been fed by chivalrous loyalty to those who have suffered before.

Cassandra replaced the torn picture at the bottom of the drawer and heaped Herne's letters on the top of it; and then she put the drawer back into its place, locked the cupboard, and thrust the key into an unhandy place. But the

Faust manuscript she purposely kept out, thinking that in completing it she might find a wholesome distraction for her mind during the trying months that lay before her.

The little vellum book remained out also. By accident she had left it lying on the floor. She discovered it after she had closed the cupboard, and, as she picked it up, she began involuntarily to read the passage at which it had opened in falling :—

‘ What name shall we give to the holy influence that rises, incense-like, from the stream of the great human life to brood above the chaos of the universe—to the infinite power, many in one, that folds us in its care and saves us, if we trust it, from sinking to the level of the beasts that perish ?

‘ We can no longer call it the Spirit of

God, for God has become to us a dethroned idol, a hieroglyph of which we know not the reading, a riddle darkened by the confused counsels of impatient ignorance.

‘ We hesitate to call it Providence, for it seems to us blind in its beneficence. Right is done to-day, and the world is blessed on some distant morrow when he who wrought the blessing has fallen asleep doubting whether all his work have not issued in a curse. Love is lavished, and the loved one is not purified by it, but an onlooker is touched with pity and the heart of a stranger grows more human. Lives are poured out like water for causes that are not true, and the true cause is bettered by the devotion that strove against it.

‘ The power is blind, but we will not call it Chance, for it obeys an unerring law, though one so subtle that we cannot trace its workings. Evil and good are

mixed, but good is not evil nor evil good, and the fruits of each are after its own kind. We may be touched to glorious issues by a gleam from an inglorious life, or taught to love the highest by lips that have themselves kissed baseness. But not therefore need we say that all is contradiction. It was not the evil in the sinner that charmed our sense like music, nor the baseness that thrilled our hearts to nobleness; but rather the undying good the evil cannot quench—the deferred promise that is not wholly broken.

‘The power is good, but we will not call it Goodness. For oftentimes the spotless ones go by and virtue comes not from them, the pure ones dwell among us and save none but themselves, the righteous meet us in the way and rebuke without redeeming.

‘The power is reasonable, but we will not call it Reason. Nor Might, though

it is mighty. For Reason is cold and cannot quicken, and Might is pitiless and crushes. And the Saving Power is warm and tender and life-giving as the bosom of a mother.

‘ We dare not call it God. But what can we say of it that has not been said of God? Like the Father it creates. Like the Son it redeems. Like the Spirit it comforts. And wheresoever two or three are gathered together in bonds of human fellowship, it is there in the midst of them to strengthen and to bless.

‘ We say we will not call it God. And yet no lower name contents. And so when men say to us that God is Love, we are constrained to answer Love is God.

‘ But some will say, Where is this Love of which you speak? We cannot find it, we do not know it. There are none who give us good-speed when we go forth to our work in the morning, or who watch

for our return at evening. Alone we have lived, and alone we must die. It is cruel to speak to us of a Love that comforts all.

‘And the Spirit of Love will answer, My name is on your lips, but your hearts are closed against me. You cry, “Where, where?” and complain that you cannot find me. And all the while I am knocking at your hearts and you will not let me in. Your brothers crowd around you—they are hungry and cold and naked—they are sad and lonely-hearted—they stretch out their hands to you and find no help. You do not hear them, you do not see them—you know only your own emptiness, your hearts are filled with the sense of your own loneliness. There is no place in them for me.

‘And others will say with a bitterer sorrow, We knew it once and we trusted it. We gave it our hearts, and it pressed

the life-blood from them, and gave them back to us cold and dead. We loved and were loved. But our loved ones are gone from us. And now we are alone and desolate, and we do not believe in the power of Love to save and comfort.

‘And again the Spirit will answer, I came to you in a human form, clothed with beauty and tenderness. I brought you the joys of love, and filled your life with sweetness. I blessed you in order that you might bless. But you took my gifts and forgot my commandments. In your happiness, you strove not to make others happy. Being blessed, you did not bless. And so love died within you, and my blessing was taken away.

‘And others, again, will say upon their knees, We do not doubt the power of Love, we are not strangers to its sweetness. We are not weary of helping or impatient because the fruits of our labours are small.

We know that if we reap little, it is because we have sown little. But we are sad because we have so little to sow—because our hearts are cold and our hands empty. We have helped others, and we are ourselves without help; we are hungry, and can find no food—troubled, and we know not where to turn for rest. And for shame we cannot speak peace to others while there is no peace in our own hearts.

‘And to these the Spirit will say, Not all at once can I bless all my children wholly. For lo! I myself am not whole—not one like the God of your fathers. Like you I am broken by sorrow, and torn by doubt and division. I dwell not in Heaven throned and mighty, but on earth in weakness and suffering. I have no existence of myself, I live but in the hearts of my children. I live while you cherish me. When you doubt me I lan-

guish, and if all men should deny me, I should cease to be. But while one heart knows me and clings to me, I may still be found.

‘Therefore if your own hearts are cold and empty seek me in the hearts of others. And if any ask you for peace, and as yet you have no peace, confess that you are desolate, and ask help of those who sought help of you. And as you join hands in sympathy with your brothers I shall return to you, and you will know my voice and be comforted.’

Cassandra read with trembling emotion. The words were her own, written years ago, and she had forgotten them. But they were true for her still, and they brought back the temper that inspired them. She had invoked the past that she might warm herself at its dead hopes and vanished dreams. And the past had

answered her, though with another voice than that which she had craved. Its answer was not in the memorials of personal happiness to which she had eagerly turned, but here in the little book in which she had been wont to pour out her thoughts in days of happier inspiration. She had laid the book aside as foreign to the occasion, and an accident had returned it to her,—such an accident as the devout of old time called a special providence, as she called by no name, but accepted in solemn thankfulness and dared not disregard.

A moment ago she had bewailed as barren the happy past and all its memories. And now her help had come out of the little book to which that past had given birth. She felt at once rebuked and strengthened. The prick of her own former enthusiasm spurred her to new effort. She would stagnate no longer.

She would break at once the insincere silence that had paralysed her life. And to Laura should be her first atonement. She would write to her now and send the little book that contained all the best thoughts of the best period of her life. And Laura's passage from the faith of the past to that of the future should be easier for the roughnesses the way had had for her.

‘Laura dearest,’ she wrote, ‘I startled you the other day with my abrupt confession, and I pained you by my impatient answers when you asked about my faith. Forgive me—I have been so long silent on all that touches it that speech is as difficult to me as to those who have lived on desert islands. And so probably, if you came to me again, I should again answer you roughly. But there was a time when I thought I could

speak of these things so as to help the world to understand them, and then I wrote my thoughts in the book that comes with this letter. I doubt now whether they will ever be given to the world. Though they are true, they may not be said with power or beauty enough to gain attention from strangers. But to you, who know me, they may be helpful. And if they are, they will not have been written in vain. Read them, and send them back to me, and some day tell me if happiness seems possible by such light as they give.

‘I go to London to-morrow to stay a fortnight with the Annesleys; you will write your news to me, and when I come back we shall talk it over.

‘CASSANDRA.’

The Annesleys were friends to whom Cassandra paid periodical visits, and she

had been glad within the last day or two to accept an invitation from them that enabled her to absent herself from Nant-y-Gwyn in a manner not likely to excite suspicion.

As Laura read the letter she felt haunted as she had done once before by spirits from an uneasy past. But she found means to lay them, and she studied the book diligently with grateful feelings towards her cousin.

END OF VOL. II.

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